

You and I by opulent_flame

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Genre: Angst, Canon Compliant, F/M, Fluff, Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Jopper, Past Abuse, Romance, Season/Series 01, Season/Series 02, Season/Series 03, Smut, also not Canon Compliant, basically just a bunch of one shots, hopper gushing over joyce, murray calling it like he sees it

Language: English

Characters: Alexei (Stranger Things), Barbara "Barb" Holland, Billy Hargrove, Bob Newby, Calvin Powell, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Florence "Flo" (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Larry Kline, Lonnie Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Murray Bauman, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

a collection of one shots for the lovely Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper -Jopper

1. Chapter 1

Notes for the Chapter:

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things.
I am merely a fan who wanted to write some fanfic
for Jopper!

They had been at this for hours.

Joyce had gone upstairs, leaving Hopper downstairs with Murray and the Russian man. Smirnoff was watching the television, a shit eating grin stretched across his face. Hopper shook his head at the sight and knew that there was no point in trying to get anything out of the man when everyone was this tired. They had walked for God knows how many miles in the heat. The sweat was pouring off his body just thinking about how hot it was, not to mention all the bugs that seemed attracted to him and only him. Hell, when he sat back against the couch and thought about it, that was just the tip of the iceberg for how insane their day had been. He felt a soft smile tug at his lips as he thought of how Joyce had lost her temper at Murray when they first arrived.

“What’s got you smiling?” Murray asked, coming from the kitchen and handing Jim a drink before plopping down on the couch.

“Hm? Nothing,” Jim replied. He gave the man a nod and glanced down at the drink in his hand. He frowned, realizing it wasn’t alcohol.

“Spare me, Jim Hopper,” Murray glared at him, taking a swig at his drink. “You haven’t so much as cracked a smile until now.”

“Well, forgive me if recent events have kind of soured everything.”

Smirnoff let out a fit of laughter at whatever he was watching, causing Hopper to roll his eyes and gesture to his obvious annoyance.

Murray ignored him, pushing his glasses up. “I think a certain little

lady upstairs is the cause for your sudden spike in giddiness.”

Hopper set his drink on the counter and shrugged. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t? Joyce goes upstairs to do whatever she is doing, maybe taking a shower? And I can only imagine the explicit direction your thoughts have most definitely taken.”

“Woah!” Hopper felt his voice getting loud, catching the attention of Smirnoff. The Russian merely glanced at them and then turned his attention back to the television. “That is not at all what I was thinking about!”

“Really?” Murray laughed. “Then please tell me how you weren’t thinking about Joyce.”

Hopper glared at him. “Fine. I was thinking about her. But, Jesus Christ, cut me some slack. I wasn’t thinking about her in your shower.” Hopper grimaced as saying the words brought a mental image to his mind. Joyce’s naked body standing underneath the showerhead as hot water cascaded down her body. The steam from the heat rising around her. Her hands rubbing up and down her body, the soapy water dripping down her skin. The way she would look as the water-

Hopper suddenly shifted in his seat, attempting to hide his growing arousal. “I was thinking about how she bossed you around earlier.”

Murray considered his words. “Yes, she’s rather bossy.”

“Yeah,” Hopper said slowly, wondering where his friend was going with this. “She is.”

Murray gave him a long look. “Despite her screaming at me when you all first arrived, I can see that she’s a kind person.”

Hopper nodded slowly. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, for starters, it would take someone incredibly kind to help heal you.”

Hopper sucked in air and found himself choking uncomfortably. *What the fuck?* Why would Murray even say something like that?

"I see the way you both look at each other," Murray continued, watching with indifference as Hopper recovered from his little choking bit.

"We aren't looking at each other like anything" Jim said, his tone serious.

"Oh, come on. You mean to tell me that you two aren't a thing?"

"No."

"Not even just hooking up?"

"Jesus, Murray. Shut up." Hopper said, glancing up at the stairs. "Drop it before she hears you."

"Ah, I see, I see! Something must have happened to cause all this turmoil between you two." Murray reasoned, clearly not worried about Hopper's fear of Joyce overhearing them. "That's the second indication that led me see how kind she is."

"What?" Hopper found himself speaking lowly. He knew he had a dangerous look in his eye. He could feel Smirnoff gazing between the two of them with interest, his annoying show forgotten.

Murray leaned forward, stating it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Kind people are kind because they know the world isn't."

Hopper looked at him, bringing his hand up to rub his beard. He wasn't appreciating where this conversation was going. It was entering sensitive territory. He considered what Murray said and almost found himself laughing bitterly. He swallowed down the anger as he thought of what Joyce had gone through with Lonnie. He had seen the marks. He had seen some of those fucked up scars that she kept hidden so well under long sleeves. He had seen the cigarette burns and the scared look in her eye when he gazed upon them for too long. The physical pain that fucker put her through was what made her kind? Not to mention the emotional pain of having to try

and live with verbal and physical abuse. That made her kinder?

Everything she went through losing Will and having everyone think she was insane. People making jokes. People thinking she had lost her mind as she told them her son wasn't really dead? Everything she is still going through with the loss of Bob. She had watched her boyfriend get ripped into by those dogs. Watched his bloodied hand reach out to her. All that fucked up shit made her kinder?

Hopper felt himself clenching the edge the couch. As he thought of everything, he realized how much an asshole he had been the last few hours. He was hurt from being stood up. He really liked Joyce and was embarrassed from everything that happened. But as he thought about everything that had happened, he found himself getting less angry and a little bit more guilty. She had been so worried about those magnets, so worried about having to relive everything they had already gone through with Will...It was no wonder that she stood him up. Yeah, his feelings were still hurt, and he was not really sure of how Joyce felt for him, but he felt a lot of his anger towards her melting away.

She really was kind. But, Hopper didn't think she was kind because of her past. No. Joyce was just one of those people that was inherently nice. She saw the good in people, maybe even people who didn't deserve it. Maybe that's what Murray meant moments ago. *It would take someone incredibly kind to help heal you.* Hopper knew he was a broken man. He knew that his past was something that had deeply hurt him, and that because of that he wasn't able to open up like he should, and still, Joyce was always standing there with him. She never made him feel like less. She never made him feel broken.

She made him feel whole.

Joyce knew what it was like to suffer, and perhaps that alone didn't make her kind, but it made her understand. She understood how fucked up the world could be and how fucked up it could leave you feeling. It didn't matter who you were either. She had been nothing but kind to this dumbass Smirnoff. He thought back to how she had been trying to communicate with him about her magnets and fought the urge to smile at how absurd everything was right now.

“Yeah, um,” he cleared his throat. “Joyce is tough.””

Murray gave him a look. “I mean, I know she has been through because her kid told me some, but-”

“No, you have no idea.” Jim growled out, suddenly becoming defensive. He knew how private Joyce was, and she already seemed rather wary with Murray, considering he had in fact pointed a gun in their faces. He had no idea what all Jonathan and Nancy had told him when they came for their visit, but he would bet they didn’t cover everything in detail. He didn’t want Joyce to feel like he was betraying her trust.

“I’m just saying, Hopper, you don’t seem-”

“No,” he hissed out. “Stop. Joyce has been through some shit you can’t even imagine. That’s all you get to know. That’s all you deserve to know. Your job isn’t to try and analyze her, or me, or our god damn relationship. Your job is find out what Smirnoff here knows about the Russians and their weapon. So, I think you will kindly back off. And seriously, you better not say a word to Joyce. If you say anything to her, and I mean anything, it won’t be pretty.”

Murray gave a sigh and shrugged. He could tell Hopper was in love with this woman, that much was obvious. He could also tell there were a lot of issues stemming from something they haven’t discussed, because their incessant bickering was starting to get on his last nerve.

“Did you guys figure anything out?” Joyce’s voice broke their tension as she walked down the stairs.

“Oh, um...” Hopper stuttered, looking at Joyce. He shifted on the couch again and seemed to be at a loss for words. He seemed utterly flustered, like a kid who was caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Murray rolled his eyes. “We were just talking about how kind you are.”

Joyce scrunched her nose and looked at them skeptically. Hopper’s face was a bright shade of red, a mixture of embarrassment and what

was predictably anger.

Murray let out a laugh. “Kidding. We figured out that we’re all really hungry. Hopper is going to go to Burger King.”

Hopper gaped at Murray and then opened his mouth to protest when Joyce cut in.

“Hmm, that sounds nice,” Joyce gave them a small smile, clearly recovering from Murray’s previous statement. “Did you ask Alexei if he wanted anything? We should probably get him something. I’m sure he’s hungry.”

Hopper shot an irritated glance at Murray, who simply gave him a quick wink.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Some Jopper fluff! Short and sweet (:

Hopper opened his eyes as light from outside began to peak through the curtains that hung in their bedroom. He squinted, letting out a soft sigh as he tried to adjust to his settings. The house was silent, so either the kids were all still asleep, or they already left the house to go and have some type of summer adventure. He felt a familiar heat radiating out from next to him and turned his head to glance at the woman who was curled up beside him. She was facing him, one hand at her side, the other outstretched so that she was almost touching him.

Jim felt his heart swell at the sight.

There were infinite reasons why he could love her. Yes, that much was certain. Hopper could create a list of reason after reason why he was in love with Joyce Byers and he was incredibly sure that he would run out of paper before he could even get halfway done. She had saved him, both physically and mentally. There had been a piece of him missing for a long time. He tried filling himself with pills and alcohol to numb the pain. He tried fucking his way through the town, just to try and feel something. No matter what he tried, nothing seemed to work.

Nothing seemed to work until he saw her smile. Her smile, *damn*, her smile was a sight that could knock him off his feet. After they saved Will from the Mind Flayer Hopper found himself stopping by Melvad's at least every other day just to stop in and try and see a glimpse of that smile. She had several smiles, and he had taken to trying and learning each and every one. It had been hard after Bob, but one day Will pulled him aside and told him how his mom only seemed to laugh when Hopper was around.

After that, he made it his goal to try and do whatever he could to try and see her happy. She saved him from the demons inside his head, so it was only fair that he could try and do the same.

But, Joyce also saved him from the demons that appeared before their very eyes. He had helped her save Will, but she saved him twice. Once from those God damn vines, and the other from those God damn Russians. How she and Murray had managed to save him from that prison was beyond him. He shouldn't have been surprised that they were clever enough to save him. No, if any two people could have done what needed to be done, it was definitely the two of them. With Joyce's tenacity, Murray's intelligence, and both their eccentricity, he knew from the moment he was taken that they would find him.

What surprised him was the way Joyce had clung to him when they rescued him. The way she had smiled at him as if he was the one that saved her. The way her hands cradled his face like it did all that time ago when she and Bob had saved him. Except this time, she was smiling with this overwhelming emotion and she pulled him so close and that's when he knew that nothing was going to tear them apart. It was in that moment he knew that she felt the same way he had been feeling for what felt like an eternity.

At that thought, Jim shifted his body in the bed and grabbed her outstretched hand, lacing their fingers together.

Joyce's eyes slowly fluttered open and she was flashing him a sleepy grin, her nose crinkling in that adorable way that never failed to make him smile in return. "How long have you been staring at me?"

"Not long enough," he said, tugging her closer.

She accepted his invitation and slid her body closer to his. She threw one leg over his hips and buried her face into the crook of his neck. He felt her breath and it sent chills down his spine. He let out a small gasp as he felt her lips on his shoulder. She pressed feather like kisses onto his skin, moving to his collar bone, and then up his neck. Her tongue flicked out, slowly licking and sucking at the sensitive flesh.

"Joyce," he groaned, his hands moving to pull her up so that she was fully straddling him.

"You know it isn't nice to stare," she said, pulling away from his neck due to his movement. She beamed down at him. She brought her

hand up to his cheek and brushed it with her thumb. She trailed it down and brought it to his lips, pulling his bottom lip down playfully.

“It’s also not nice to tease,” he said, his voice deep with his sudden growing arousal.

“Well, I guess we’re even then,” she gave him a cheeky grin and swiveled her hips.

Hopper instinctively grabbed her hips at her movement and suppressed a groan.

“*Joyce* ,” he said her name again, closing his eyes. He squeezed her hips with his hands, letting them slowly start to roam up under her shirt.

“*Jim* ,” she giggled.

He opened his own eyes at the sound of her laughter and gazed up at her. Her hair was a chaotic mess, brown waves hanging down around her face. Her eyes were shining and he couldn’t help but to reach up and pull her down and crash his lips against hers. She let out another giggle and melted into his kiss, opening her mouth to give access to his tongue.

“I love you,” he breathed out, his hand cradling her head. “So, so much.”

She pressed her lips back to his before whispering, “I love you, too, Hop.”

3. Chapter 3

The last time any of them had to deal with something from the upside down was almost two years ago. Life had returned to a sense of normalcy. After Hopper's return from Russia, he and Joyce fell into a steady relationship. Although they found themselves co-parenting El, their relationship development was slow to start. Hopper returned with a lot of emotional baggage, and it was Joyce's turn to be there for him. However, instead of avoiding their growing feelings for another, they decided to try and work through things together, and now were officially a couple.

They had been living together for six months when Hopper was called to come in and help on some police work out of town. It wasn't the first night he had spent without Joyce, as he was occasionally called into the station at night for some absurd emergency, but it was the first time he had been away from home for this long since he was a prisoner in Russia. It was the end of the second day, nearing the third night, when Hopper pulled himself away from the other officers to make a phone call home. He glanced over at the clock and grimaced as he realized how late it actually was. It was a quarter past eleven on a school night. Surely Will and El would be asleep, and he couldn't imagine that Joyce was awake either.

Still, it had been over twenty-four hours since he last spoke to any of them and he couldn't deny the paranoia brewing inside him. He knew he was being irrational, but the other part of him reminded him that actually was being entirely rational. His family had been to hell and back. They were all plagued with their own nightmares, having suffered their own miseries over the past few years, and Hopper would be damned if he didn't admit that he was worried about something happening while he was away. He had been hesitant to go, and probably wouldn't have gone if Joyce hadn't given him reassurance after reassurance.

Hopper knew he shouldn't call this late, but the longer he stood by the phone, the more his mind started to race with endless possibilities. Maybe Will was back in the upside down. He was stuck again somehow and the gate was closed so they wouldn't get to him.

He was running out of time and he needed Hopper to come save him. He thought of how pale the boy had looked all that time ago, wincing as he remembered the Mind Flayer possessing his small body. He tried to think about something else, but then his thoughts drifted to El. What if Brennar was back? What if he was back and he found El and he was performing his sick tests on her? What if she was gone and he had no way of getting her back? And Joyce. What if she was having a nightmare? Who would be there to help her come out of it? What if she was having a panic attack because one of those creatures was back and she wasn't able to defend herself?

What if...what if...

He was dialing the home phone number before he could even stop himself. The first ring hit his ear and he felt a small sense of relief.

Then came the second ring.

Then the third.

Hopper felt himself tensing up and knew his knuckles were growing white from his grip on the phone. As the fourth ring started, an extremely sleepy voice answered the phone.

"Hello?" Joyce muffled into the phone.

"Hey," Hopper felt the tension flood his body. Her voice brought his spiraling thoughts back into control. They were safe. His family was home and they were safe. His heart was still pounding and he could feel the erratic thud in his ears. "It's me."

"Jim?" she asked, seeming more awake once she realized it was him. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah everything's fine," he assured her. "Just haven't heard from you in a while."

Her soft laughter came through the phone, "I told you that you didn't need to worry about us."

"Can you blame me?" he asked, his tone a little more serious than he intended.

Joyce ignored his question. "I miss you," she said, her voice sounding delectably sweet.

Jim grinned and brought his free hand up to run it through his hair. "I miss you, too."

"When are you coming home?" she let out a soft sigh, and he could imagine her leaning against the wall in that over-sized blue t-shirt she slept in.

"Shouldn't be too much longer," he said. "Everything should be wrapping up within the next few hours, so I should be able to drive back at some point tomorrow. How are things there?"

"You'll be relieved to know that things have been completely uneventful. El went to stay the night with Max, so it's just me and Will here."

"And nothing suspicious has happened?" he found himself asking. "There haven't been any problems?" A part of him cringed at how crazy and paranoid he sounded, but he simply couldn't stop himself. After everything that happened to him as a prisoner his mind tended to conjure up many scenarios. He blamed the drugs they had him on. Those damn drugs made him hallucinate some messed up shit. It had all felt so real and he was certain it had left him with emotional scars that forced him to think the worst would really happen.

"No," she said. "Well, actually, there is this one problem that-"

"*What?*" Hopper hissed out. "Why didn't you call me? Joyce, you said you would call me if something happened!"

"Hop, calm down," Joyce said quickly. "I was just saying that the only problem is that the bed feels really empty without you."

"Oh," he breathed out.

He let out an exhale and felt himself start to calm down.

"Yeah," she spoke quietly. "So stop stressing about us and get back to work so you can come home and keep me warm at night."

Hopper let out a small chuckle at that and shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I've been worried about you, too. It's just what we do now."

"I know. I know that this is how normal life should be and I need to try and move on from everything, it's just all-"

"Hop," she cut him off. "You don't owe me an explanation. If you want to call me at three in the morning to check on us, I'll understand. But, I promise, everything is okay."

"Okay," he said. "Okay, yeah."

"Now, as much as I would love to talk to you more, I do work early tomorrow, and I have a big empty bed all to myself that's calling my name."

"Only for one more night," he said as a reminder, more for his own benefit than hers.

"Only for one more night," she repeated.

Hopper set the phone down and glanced out the window. Although this trip was proving to be hard on him mentally, he felt a small sense of peace from the conversation. He allowed himself to think that maybe, just maybe, he really didn't have to worry about demogorgons or evil scientists trying to kill his family. It was a strange thought, and he wasn't sure if he would ever get to a place where he wasn't worried about the Upside Down, but he was hopeful that one day it wouldn't be so consuming.

But, for now, he would continue on with his worries until he was back home.

4. Chapter 4

Joyce walked into the bathroom and began to take off her clothes to take a quick shower before work. She pulled at her night shirt and turned to see her reflection in the mirror, the image before her making her freeze in place. Her mouth fell open and she brought her hand up to her neck. Her fingers ghosted over the red marks that were already beginning to fade to purple. They trailed down her neck and onto her chest, painting her chest in various shades of bruising color.

“Jesus, Hopper,” she whispered as she examined the love bites he had left on her last night. She knew they hadn’t exactly been gentle, but she certainly didn’t think he had been sucking at her skin hard enough to leave so many marks.

Shaking her head, she continued to undress. She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her body and made her way to the bedroom. Hopper was already up and getting dressed. He was still in his black boxers, having thrown on his undershirt and was beginning to put on his police uniform.

“You shower already?” he asked, buttoning up his shirt.

“No, I got distracted by something.”

Hopper didn’t look up at her, not noticing the coloring on her skin. “Oh? Something interesting happen in the bathroom?” his voice was slightly amused, teasing her.

“I was going to shower when I discovered that apparently I was sharing the bed with a leech last night!”

This made Hopper snap his head up. He took a step towards her, his eyes looking at her neck. He reached out his hand and pulled the towel down, his hands tracing over the marks as hers did previously.

Joyce parted her lips and watched him.

His eyes made their way back to hers and an enormous grin overtook

his face. His eyes were suddenly dark with desire and he seemed completely and utterly aroused by the sight.

“You’re grinning, but what do you expect me to do with this?” she frowned at him. “I don’t even know where to begin covering all this up!”

“You don’t need to cover up them up,” he said, bending down to press his lips to the marked skin on her neck.

Joyce let out a soft moan and felt the towel starting to slip off her hips. She closed her eyes at the feeling of his lips pressing softly and considered his words.

“I can’t go to work with hickies covering my neck and chest,” she said, but the protest sounded weak to her own ears as she felt herself being guided to the bed, her legs hitting the mattress and causing her to fall onto it. The move allowed Hopper to move his mouth down her neck and onto her chest. His tongue was swirling, delicately tracing over the marks that he made a few hours ago.

“No one will see your chest,” he mumbled against her skin.

“My neck,” she whispered, her hands going to his hair..

“Let people see,” he said lowly. “Let people know that you’re mine.”

Joyce let out a laugh at his suggestion. “Yeah, you say that now, but we both know how trashy it can look.”

“Hmm, don’t care.”

“Jim,” she whined, her hands tensing in his hair. “This isn’t high school. You can’t give me hickies!”

He glanced up at her, moving his face so that his lips were close to hers. “If you don’t like them, I won’t do it again. I didn’t mean to leave so many marks. I just- God, I just get carried away with you.”

That comment made her blush and before she could react, his lips met hers and they were soft and warm. His kisses in the morning were always sweet, showing more love than lustful passion. They

were quite possibly her favorite kisses from him to receive, but she couldn't let them continue to get carried away. She could feel his own growing arousal pressing against her hip through the thin black material he wore. She found her mouth parting at she thought about it and she soon felt his tongue entering, playfully teasing hers. Joyce let out a groan and felt her hands come up to try and push him away. She knew she was letting things get escalate into dangerous territory, but they needed to get ready for work.

"Hmm," she hummed against him, breaking away. "I do like them. I like them very much," she admitted as she thought about how his eyes darkened at the sight of her. "But not where people can see them."

Hopper let out a noise that she couldn't quite decipher. It sounded like a mixture of amusement but also pleasure. "Okay, got it. All future hickies will be below your neck."

Joyce flushed at the thought and smiled up at him. "I'm going to have to wear turtle necks for the next couple of days because of you."

"Well, it's getting cold, so maybe you should thank me for helping keep you warm," he joked, his eyes going to look back at her neck.

"Alright, alright," she pushed at him again, seeing from his expression where he wanted things to go. "I have to go shower and leave soon."

Hopper pulled back with a slight frown, rolling off of her so that she could get up from the bed. "Want me to join you? I see a lot of places below your neck that need my attention."

Joyce shook her head at him, despite the thought sounding way too appealing. However, she knew if Hopper joined her, they would both be late for work. She turned to look at him, seeing the disappointed look on his face. His eyes caught her and he gave her a curious look as he saw her eyes shining with mischief. "This way you can have something to look forward to for later"

Hopper watched as the bathroom door closed, and Joyce heard him let out a soft chuckle as he tried to collect himself to go to work. She

smiled to herself as she turned on the water to get ready for her day.

She didn't look so bad in turtlenecks anyways.

5. Chapter 5

Hopper watched as the kids started dissipating from his line of sight. They were all going to Murray's where they would be safe until all this shit was over. He watched as Mike trailed behind El and Max, and despite having some issues with the boy, he was glad to know he would be there to comfort El. El was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, but she was hurt, so he figured he could be there for his daughter until Hopper and Murray were able to return.

He felt a presence at his side and saw Joyce coming to stand next to him. She let out a sigh and glanced over at him. He furrowed his brow, wondering why she was standing there and not going off with the kids. That was the plan. At least, that was the plan inside his head. They hadn't discussed it per say, but Hopper assumed that everyone was on the same page. El and Joyce were going to be out of harms way. They were going to be safe, and he was going to finish this once and for all.

"What?" Joyce asked him, her voice slightly confused.

"What are you doing?" he couldn't help the anger that slipped out.

"What do you mean 'what am i doing'?" she gave him a look. "I'm waiting for you to be ready to go."

No.

No.

Did she seriously think he was going to let her come with them to sneak onto the Russian base and destroy the machine and close the gate to the Upside Down? Did she really think he was going to let herself be put in more danger?

"Joyce, you're not going. End of story." he stated in a serious voice that didn't leave room for argument. "Now, get out of here and don't keep the kids waiting."

Joyce glared at him and put her hands on her hips. She looked like

she was formulating a response, but Hopper didn't bother waiting to hear what she had to say. He wasn't arguing with her about this. If he had any say at all, she was going to Murray's. He pushed himself up and began grabbing things to head to the place Dustin had told them about.

"I'm coming!" Joyce called out. "I was the one who told you about the magnets in the first place!"

Hopper ignored her, looking over to Murray.

"Ready to go?" he asked, glancing as the man was fiddling with a walkie talkie.

His friend gave him a weary look. "Listen, Jim...I've been thinking it over and I really think we should consider altering the plan."

Hopper felt his jaw clench. "I swear to-"

"Hop, this isn't a debate," Joyce cut him off. "Murray and I talked it over and-

"Yeah, it's not a debate because you're not fucking going," he didn't look at her and started walking off. Despite what he just said, he felt the two of them following after him and he felt himself really starting to lose his composure.

"Murray, tell him that I need to go," Joyce said, practically jogging to try and keep up with Hopper's long strides.

Jim rounded the corner and looked at her incredulously. She really thought Murray was going to butt in and help her? Ha! Murray didn't usually help people he just met unless there was something in it for him. It had taken years for Hopper to earn his trust. "It's a two man operation. *Two!*"

"Yeah, well, change of plans," she bit back at him.

"Change of plans?" Hopper scoffed. She was being utterly ridiculous. Why couldn't she just listen to him? He was only doing this to protect her and she was looking at him like he was the bad guy in all of this.

“Yeah. Will you explain it to him, please?” Joyce asked Murray for help again.

Hopper was surprised when Murray came to her aid.

“We have two options here, Jim. We can turn the machine off or we can explode it,” he said quickly, trying to explain their train of thought.

Hopper checked his gun, really fighting to keep his composure. He had known Joyce for what, two days? And here he was, already siding with her over him. “Oh yeah? Says who?”

“Says the man who built it!” Murray screamed out at him as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Yeah, and we wanna explode it!” Joyce chimed in.

“Or else our heroic efforts will be for naught! This is a three-man operation, Jim, not two.”

“Yeah, three!”

Hopper let out a groan and shoved the doors open.

“When?” he spun around, making the two of them stop in their tracks.

“Pardon me?” Murray asked, clearly not following. He exchanged a quick glance with Joyce.

“When the hell did you two decide all of this was going to happen?” Hopper hissed.

Joyce looked startled at this and Murray simply rolled his eyes.

“Jim, we can discuss the fine details later if it pleases you, but right now we really need to get going,” Murray said irritably. He shoved his way past Hopper and started making his way towards the elevator.

Hopper grunted and glared at him, his eyes slowly coming back to

look at Joyce. She was looking at him, waiting to see his reaction.

“Please, *please*, don’t do this,” he found himself speaking softly. He gazed down at her, taking in her tiny frame and large tired eyes.

Joyce’s expression changed and she gave him a small frown. “I’m not letting you do this without me.”

“They killed Alexei,” the sound of Smirnoff’s real name coming off his lips surprised them both. “They killed their own man, and they won’t hesitate to kill you either.”

Just suggesting the idea out loud was enough to make his fists clench and his body feel cold all over.

“Hop, I know what we’re up against,” she reached out a hand and placed it on his arm. He closed his eyes at the feeling of her delicate hand on him. “We went to the Upside Down together, I think we can handle this.”

“Murray and I can handle this,” he opened his eyes and gave her a hard look.

“Well, I’m coming anyways,” she said evenly.

“Why?” he growled out at her. “Why are you so hellbent on coming with us, Joyce?”

“Because last time you went without me *I almost lost you !*” Joyce cried out, snatching her hand away from him.

Hopper felt his mouth fall open at her words. He felt like a deer in headlights as he watched her face break with emotion. Her eyes looked glossy at the admission and she bit her lip in frustration.

“Joyce...” he said her name. He wasn’t sure what else to say. He hadn’t expected her to admit something so honest and intimate.

“No!” she shook her head. “You went down there and those vines almost killed you! You made me stay behind at the lab and that psychopath giant beat you until you were unconscious! I can’t do that, Jim! I can’t lose you...”

Hopper's eyes widened as it dawned on him. She was afraid of losing him just as much as he was afraid of losing her.

"If you want it to be a two man job so bad then you stay behind!" she jutted a finger at him, her anger filling the room.

"Stop being ridiculous," he narrowed his eyes at her. "If you think for a moment that I would let you do this without me..."

"Then why are you always trying to do things without me?" she cried out.

"Because I can't lose you either!" he shouted.

Joyce flinched at the volume, but he watched as her face softened. The same realization he had come to moments before seemed to have clicked in her mind as well. She stepped forward and suddenly pulled him into a hug. Her small arms tightened around him and she buried her face into his chest. Hopper instinctively wrapped his arms around her and let out a sigh, all the tension fleeing his body.

This was it.

They both just admitted that they couldn't lose each other. They were hugging, and Joyce felt so small and soft in his arms. He shifted, and she glanced up at him, their eyes locking.

Hopper knew this wasn't the time. This wasn't how he wanted to do it. He was going to take her on a date, make an entire evening out of it. She wasn't like all those other women, and he wanted to do things right with her. But she stood him up. She stood him up and he was beginning to think that maybe he was misreading the signals. However, he knew he wasn't misreading anything right now. The way her body was pressed against his. The way her chocolate brown eyes were looking at him, pupils dilating. The way her breath hitched as he began to lean down.

She said she couldn't lose him.

His lips were moving closer, and he watched with great pleasure as she closed her eyes.

She wanted this.

She wanted *him*.

He could feel the warmth from her radiating and his lips were ghosting over hers. They were only centimeters apart when the obnoxious voice of Murray came crashing down on them.

“Hey, lovebirds! Stop fooling around and let’s go!”

Joyce quickly pushed away. She stumbled backwards and her cheeks flushed red. She was looking down, crossing her arms.

Hopper closed his eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. He flicked open his eyes, gazing down at Joyce. He licked his lips and fought back the urge to groan. He was so close to kissing her. So close to having that physical conformation that he had been longing for.

“I, uh- I guess we should go,” Joyce mumbled. She turned from him and began scurrying off to Murray.

Hopper cursed lowly and followed after them.

He realized that this meant he lost the argument. Although it pained him to think about, Joyce was coming with them. There was no way he was talking her out of it. They didn’t have time. Jesus, what he wouldn’t give for just one more second. Despite what he wanted, Joyce was going with him to some secret Russian base and he had to pretend like it wasn’t eating away at him.

He had to pretend like he hadn’t just almost kissed her.

He had actually almost kissed her.

The mere thought was enough to send his mind reeling with possibility.

He wasn’t sure what plan Murray and Joyce apparently hatched behind his back, but he knew two things for certain: first, he was going to close that god damn gate. He didn’t care what it took, they were going to seal it shut and it was never going to open again.

Then, he was going to kiss Joyce Byers, and *nothing* was going to stop him.

6. Chapter 6

The Wheeler family was hosting a small party in celebration of the 'summer beginning' and various people were scattered all around. It was just an absurd excuse for Karen to hold a get together and show off how *wonderful* everything was going for her. Joyce wasn't bothered by the woman's persistent need to give off an air of a perfect family and a perfect life. If anything, she respected her for always trying so hard. No, Joyce was bothered because of how overwhelming it all was.

It had been almost two years since Will disappeared and people still couldn't stop talking about it. She was tempted to stay at home, but her children had insisted she come. They didn't want her sitting at home another night, focusing on the past. She would have said no to anyone else, but they were both looking at with that look...She figured she could handle one night out.

When they first arrived, people eyes were lingering a bit too long. She could see people leaning to whisper to one another, looking at her son as if he was a ghost even though it had *two years* . Joyce found herself thinking of all those kids who called him Zombie Boy and tried best to push down all the thoughts that could stir up. She assumed that once other people began to arrive, their attention would turn to something other than her or her children.

However, the night was young, and people in Hawkins didn't seem to have anything else to talk about.

"Oh, look, Joyce is here!" a woman dressed in a flimsy blue dress gave a fake smile

"Well, you saw that Will was here," another whispered, her brown eyes flicking over to the other room where the children were hanging out. "You know she won't let him go anywhere without her since what happened."

"It's crazy if you ask me," the lady in the blue dress flipped her blonde hair. "I bet her kid ran off because of how she acts. You remember what Lonnie was saying..."

“Yeah, he said she painted a Ouija board in her house!” a third lady piped in. “Donald even said she purchased like twenty boxes of Christmas lights!”

“But what about the funeral they had?” the other woman asked. “You think she made up his death and all that?”

Joyce tuned them out and brought the dull red punch to her lips and forced herself to take a long sip. It was brimmed to the top with several pieces of crushed ice that Ted has lazily plopped into her solo cup. The room temperature drink was contrasting with cold ice cubes and it was causing her cup to sweat in a way that only seemed to bother her. She stared intently at the water dripping down her cup and wiped away furiously at it with the palm of her hand.

She hated when drinks did this. This is why they should have refrigerated the punch before hand. Or maybe Ted shouldn't just be giving out ice cubes in such large quantities! Honestly, what was he thinking? Didn't he realize how expensive ice could be? Probably not! He probably doesn't think about the price of ice cubes because he's never had to think about something so insignificant because he has always had a sturdy job and that's why he put so many god damn ice cubes in her cup and that's why her palm is all wet, and oh god, why didn't she just use her sleeve instead of getting her hand all wet? She pulled her sleeve down and tried to wipe away the residue, frowning her brow as she tried to concentrate.

Joyce, breathe.

She was trying her hardest to keep herself together. She knew she was hyper fixating on something to keep herself grounded. She really didn't care about something so trivial, but it was taking all she could to not start breaking down, to not let her anxiety consume her...Clearly she wasn't doing that great of a job though, because she could feel Hopper's eyes watching her every move.

“You don't have to stay here and watch over me like a hawk,” she mumbled, watching idly as he stepped towards her and reached out to take the cup away from her. He quickly turned and tossed it into the trash can. She leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms, biting her bottom lip with her teeth.

"I know," he shrugged, leaning against the wall and staring down at her.

"Seriously, Hop," she rolled her eyes. "I'm fine."

"I heard you," he said sincerely. "But, I'm also hearing a lot of bullshit gossip."

Joyce blinked at him before shaking her head. It didn't matter. She didn't want any of it to matter. All she cared about was that Will was home, he wasn't possessed, and she didn't give a damn about what anyone said otherwise.

"We can leave whenever you want," Hopper said lowly so that she was the only one to hear him.

She glanced up at him, her eyes wide. *We* can leave. He would really leave this party if she wanted to? It wasn't the first time she had caught on to him speaking that way. It had started a little before they started taking Will to see Sam Owens. At first it wasn't always the most consistent thing, but as of recent, they were always *we*. They were always a unit in his eyes. They were a team, and Joyce had certainly noticed the looks he had been giving her. The way his eyes were always so warm when he looked her. The way his expression was always so soft.

It comforted her.

But it also frightened her.

She liked Hopper. She really did. That's what made it so difficult. She liked him more and more every time she was with him, and she was scared that she was going to jump into something she couldn't handle emotionally. After everything with Bob...That all takes a long time to heal from, and what if she isn't completely healed? Does she even deserve happiness after everything that happened? Jim certainly deserved somebody who had their shit together, and Joyce? She never seemed to have her shit together. She didn't want to mess anything up with him. She didn't want things to change because she truly didn't think she could live without him at this point.

She'd rather only have part of him than none of him.

Maybe it was selfish. Maybe she was denying something that could be great. But what happened when it wasn't great anymore? Lonnie was great...until he wasn't. She couldn't handle the fallback. She couldn't handle them not being *we*. So much so that it scared the hell out of her.

She hated that she did this. She hated it more than she hated that awful sweaty cup that was still lingering in her mind because she really wanted to think about that and not let her mind run rampant with thoughts like these. She hated that she let fear control her. She always let her mind go down paths of terrible outcomes, and that's probably the reason she let herself stay in the house every night she had off. She was guilty. So unbelievably guilty and instead of trying to move on she let that guilt consume her.

Bob wasn't her fault, but sometimes she felt like it was.

She couldn't afford to love someone else, because what if she lost them?

Lonnie left her. She had put up with so much shit, endured so many years that had taken a toll on her, and yet she still stayed. She didn't give up on people. She never did. She didn't love him anymore, but a part of her remembered what it was like to be in love with him. She remembered the good with Lonnie, and it gave her hope that always made her stay. Then, he left her. Lonnie Byers fucking left her.

Bob left her, too. He wasn't the type to walk out, and that's why she let herself feel safe. She felt safe in their relationship and perhaps that's why she was still so shaken over him. But he left her, too.

She couldn't lose Hopper.

Stop letting fear control you.

Joyce looked at Hopper and took in his form. He was so tall, his presence alone was so assertive and domineering that it surprised her when she really surveyed him. She forgot how intimidating he could be. He was never like that to her. Yeah, she was him as bigger than

her, but she never saw his size as something to fear. Lonnie left her with enough scars to teach her that men couldn't be trusted, but it was so different with Hopper.

Then what are you afraid of?

She trusted him. She trusted him so much, so why couldn't she let their relationship turn into something more? She knew he wanted to. He hadn't expressed it outloud, but she could see it written all over his face.

We.

Was it really better to only have half of him?

She could have all of him. She could be with him and she could let that fear dissolve into comfort. She could have him, and maybe he wouldn't leave her behind like everyone else had. Maybe he would be there and maybe she could do it. Maybe she could let herself feel again...

"Earth to Joyce," Hopper's voice called out to her, his large hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "You okay?"

She glanced at his hand, her body trembling slightly from the contact, before looking up at him. "Yeah, sorry. I just- you got a smoke?" she found herself asking.

He gave a small chuckle, reaching into his pocket. "Hmm, yeah. But it's not filtered, so you're not going to like it."

He pulled out the container and flicked out a single cigarette for her to take.

"Want to go sit outside with me until the kids want to leave?" she gave him a small smile, grabbing the cigarette.

"Sure, yeah," he smiled back at her. "This party is pretty lame anyways."

Joyce led the way to the door and brought them outside. There were a few chairs scattered around, so she sat down and held out the

cigarette expectantly towards Hopper. He brought out his lighter and quickly did as she wanted. Joyce brought the cigarette to her lips and took a small inhale, hoping that taking a smaller puff would help her not cough. Unfortunately, a few seconds later she began coughing as she exhaled and tried to hand it back to Hopper.

He laughed at her and took it, taking a drag himself. The cigarette seemed to calm him and he gave Joyce a long hard stare.

“You know not to listen to them, right?” Hopper said, his voice suddenly very serious.

“Hop,” she sighed out his name.

“No, Joyce,” he glared at her. “They don’t know the first thing about you or your family, so don’t listen to any of the shit they say.”

“Okay,” she nodded, seeing that he was clearly worked up about it. “I was bothered a little at first,” she admitted. “But then I started thinking about something else.”

“What?” he asked, letting smoke exhale through his mouth.

“You.”

Suddenly, Hopper began coughing with the cigarette, looking a lot like Joyce did a few moments ago. She laughed at him, earning her a scowl.

“What about me?” the desperation in his voice not lost on her ears.

“You think of us as a unit.”

“Well, yeah-” he started, his face scrunched up in confusion.

“And at first it really frightened me,” she watched as his face dropped. It looked like she had stabbed in right in the heart, so she quickly scrambled the next part to try and fix his expression. “But I started thinking about it, and it’s not being with you that scares me. It’s being without you.”

“Joyce, you won’t ever lose me.”

“No,” she whispered. “You can’t promise me that.”

“I can try to-” he tried again, only to watch as she stood up and made her way towards him. She took the cigarette out of his mouth and then promptly crawled into his lap. She curled against him, pressing her face into the crook of his neck. He wrapped his arms around her, his eyes widening in shock from her actions.

“I’m afraid to be without you,” she repeated. “And for a while I’ve been pushing you away.”

“Hey, I understand,” he soothed, rubbing his hand slowly up and down her arm. “I understand.”

“No, Hop, you don’t. Those women, they say all those things and that’s whatever. The whole town can say I’m crazy, they can think that, and I don’t care. It does make me anxious. A lot of things make me anxious and afraid. God, I feel like I’m afraid all the time. I’m afraid, until I see you. You make me feel okay. You make me feel like I can have another chance, and I’m tired of trying to push that away.”

Hopper pulled her face away from his neck and looked into her eyes

“You won’t ever push me away,” he said. “I’ll be here, Joyce. I’ll be here until you’re ready. You make me feel like I can have another chance, too”

Joyce smiled at him and rested her head against his chest, curling up against him. She glanced up at the stars and heard the faint sound of music coming from inside. She knew they couldn’t actually stay out here until the party was over. It would raise too many questions and she really didn’t want to have to deal with anymore gossip than she already had to. But, this moment...

She didn’t feel guilt as he held her closer.

Nor she she feel fear.

All she felt from him was *love*.

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Ice-skating with the Byers/Hopper family!

The cold brush of wind painted his face and sent chills down his spine. Never in a million years would Hopper have chosen to leave the comfort of his warm house on a Saturday in the middle of January to go and try to ice-skate on the lake. When El and Will burst into the bedroom that morning already wrapped up in scarves with their hats and gloves, yammering on and on about how everyone else had already had the chance to go and skate at the lake, Hopper had a hard time saying no. Not only were his children practically begging as if their very lives depended on it, the mention of ice-skating seemed to brighten Joyce's sleepy eyes considerably. So, predictably, Hopper found himself standing in the snow, fumbling with the ice-skates he had purchased for the occasion.

"Do you know what you're doing?" El giggled at her father. Joyce was helping El lace up her skates and Hopper saw her nose crinkle in delight as she gave him a sideways glance.

"I'm figuring it out," he waved her off, fighting off his own smile.

Will was already out on the lake skating around with considerable ease. He was wobbling a bit as he began to take some turns, but Hopper could tell that it wasn't his first time skating.

"Where'd you learn to skate?" Hopper called out to the boy, taking a tentative step towards the lake.

"Oh," Will cast a quick glance at his mom. "Mom taught me."

Joyce gave her son an encouraging grin and slowly walked El over to Will. The girl was having trouble trying to keep her balance and quickly grabbed out for Will's hand as Joyce let her go. Hopper watched as Will started to try and give instruction to his new sister, the two of them laughing as El almost toppled them both over.

“Be careful!” Joyce warned them.

She stood watching them for a few moments longer before turning to look at Hopper. Her gaze went down to his poorly tied skates. “I’m going to have to fix that for you.”

“I never knew you were such a skating expert,” he teased as she bent down to help him. He looked at her with a playful smile. Her movements were quick and he really was impressed with how familiar she seemed with this.

“Hmm, well there’s a lot you don’t know about me,” she tugged on his laces and gave him a coquettish smirk.

“Oh, I seriously doubt that,” he shook his head, enjoying her flirtatious attitude.

She stood up and gave him a sultry look. “You’re all done. I guess I’ll just go take care of myself now, since your’re finished first.”

Hopper’s eyes widened as he realized the double meaning of her words.

“That’s how you want to play this?” he asked, his voice suddenly rough.

“Play what?” she asked innocently. She turned her attention to her her skates and began to lace them up. Hopper watched her tug on her own laces and felt himself swallow. He wasn’t sure why the action was so attractive to him, but he suddenly didn’t care about skating anymore. In fact, his mind was going down a very different direction. He wouldn’t mind fucking Joyce while she wore those skates. Maybe using those laces to tie her up. Yeah, they would see who would finish first then.

Joyce stood up, looking at him expectantly. “You ready?”

Hopper cleared his throat and gave a small nod. He couldn’t think about all that right now. He would have plenty of time to plan all that out later. The children would surely be going to bed early, clearly worn out from today’s adventure.

He took a tentative step onto the ice and stumbled a little. He hadn't been ice skating in *years* . The last time he went skating was probably back in junior high. It just wasn't something he enjoyed all that much. He was tall, even back then, and trying to keep his balance with a thin blade on ice wasn't exactly a specialty of his.

Joyce raised an eyebrow at him. "Need some help?"

Hopper was about to tell her no. He wasn't one to ask for help on things. He could usually figure them out on his own and he certainly hated to be shown up by others. However, it really had been ages since he skated. He truly wasn't sure how to proceed without falling face first onto the frozen lake and probably busting his nose.

"Yeah, you're the master," he gave her a wink.

A small red flush was barely visible on her cheeks as he made that comment. She let out a small laugh and extended her hand to him. Her gloved hand fit into his and she tugged him forward. Her gloves were too thin, he realized quickly, and he made a mental note to buy her a better pair soon. He knew better than to make a comment right now. Joyce hated that he was always trying to buy her stuff. Although they were married, she disliked money being spent on her. He knew it stemmed from years of having to sacrifice her own stuff so that the boys could have more, but Hopper was more than willing to buy her whatever she wanted. It had certainly caused them a few arguments in the past.

"You just have to move your feet like this," she said to him, nudging him slightly to make him focus.

Hopper tried to mimic her movements. His movements were much bigger than hers, and although she was clearly much more skilled, he seemed to be setting the pace. He appeared to be getting the hang of it, and soon enough, they were moving at a halfway decent pace.

"Yeah! Just like that," she nodded. "See, you're a natural!"

"Sure," he snorted. "Looks like the kids are having a good time." Hopper nodded in the direction of El and Will.

El was no longer holding onto Will's hand. She seemed to have picked up some basics, but was now intently watching Will as he tried to balance on one foot. He was waving his arms frantically as he did so, making a big show out of it. El starting clapping her hands and Will set his foot down and took a big bow.

"It's really nice to see them like this," she said softly.

Hopper glanced down at her and nodded. These were the moments that made everything worth it. Hearing the laughter of his children as they actually got to act like children was the most uplifting thing in the world. The two of them had been through so much the past few years. They were young teenagers now, but they had seen more than most people would see in their entire lifetime.

They had a lot of bad days. There were times when El became so frustrated with her lack of progress into the natural world that she lashed out at them. She shut down and it was so hard to try and help her. She pushed people away because she wasn't always sure how to let them in. Adjusting was difficult for her. She was still trying to catch up from all those years in the lab, and on top of that dealing with raging hormones that resulted in uncontrollable tears. Hopper really felt out of his element with this and was so thankful that he had Joyce there by his side to try and help.

For every bad day that El had, Will seemed to suffer at night. He was often plagued with nightmares. He woke up screaming in the middle of the night, crying to his mother about the things he had seen. Hopper knew it was just flashbacks to everything that had happened to the kid. That didn't stop Will from waking up in a cold sweat, sobbing out to his mom that the Mind Flayer was going to come back and get him. Joyce had been wary at first that it could be something more, but El assured them that the gate was closed forever.

They all had trouble believing that sometimes.

Sometimes Hopper wasn't sure who the nightmares affected more, Will or Joyce. She had her fair share of night terrors, reliving memories that plagued her with insurmountable guilt. He couldn't count how many times he woke up to find her whimpering in her sleep, or sometimes not even in the bed at all. She would drag herself

to the bathroom and hide out there as she tried to pull herself back into reality.

Hopper was more like El. He was too angry. He hated what his family had been through. He hated how much they had to sacrifice in order to get to where they were. The anger was consuming and sometimes he found himself lashing out as his daughter does.

Progress was slow, but they were surely making it. The good days that seemed few were becoming more and more frequent. They were all healing. They were finally starting to move on from everything and as Joyce said, it really was nice to see them like this.

Hopper continued watching the kids and their silly antics, not really paying attention to his own skating. He didn't noticed that his feet had slowly moved too close together, the blades catching one another.

"Jim!" he heard Joyce's panic as he felt himself stumbling forward.

He tried to let go of her hand as he toppled down. He tried, but he simply wasn't quick enough. Hopper smacked down onto the ice and felt Joyce land half on his side and half on the ice. Despite the flash of pain he felt from the impact, he spun around and sat her up, his eyes scanning over her.

"Jesus, Fuck- I'm so sorry. Joyce, I'm so sorry." his hands were roaming up her sides and he tried to see if could see any visual injury. "Are you hurt?"

She looked stunned. Her eyes were wide as she glanced at him. Hopper didn't see any physical injury, but he couldn't be sure. He took the brunt of the fall, and he was sure he might not even bruise from it. However, she was considerably smaller than him... He felt himself starting to panic at her silence, but then a small smirk tugged at her lips. He felt relief flood through him as she started laughing. Her laugh was infectiously loud and he couldn't help but join in.

"God, I didn't realize how uncoordinated you are!" she gasped out in between giggles.

El and Will had made their way over to them and El was laughing as well.

“I wish we could’ve got that on camera! Jonathan would’ve loved to see that!” Will teased his mother.

“Dad!” El chuckled. “You’re really bad at this.”

Hopper shook his head. “I got distracted. Really, my teacher should have been paying closer attention.” he shot Joyce a look of mock annoyance.

She rolled her eyes at him and then started to push herself up from the ground. Will skated closer and offered his hand. He helped pull her up from the ground and let out a laugh as she started to brush some crushed ice from her jacket.

Hopper pushed himself off the ground slowly, trying to keep his balance as he stood. El hovered near him for a moment, making sure he didn’t fall again. Once she felt like he was standing with enough stability, she gave a small nod to Will.

“You didn’t have to take mom down with you,” she stuck her tongue out at Hopper as she began to skate away, Will racing after her.

Hopper sent her a good-natured glare as he felt Joyce skate up next to him. She offered him her small gloved hand again and he was hesitant to take it.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, watching as she grabbed his hand despite his trepidation.

“I’m okay,” she gave him a sincere smile. “I don’t mind going down, as long as you do first.”

Hopper actually let out a gasp at that and quickly shot a glance over to the children. They were too far away to hear her, off skating in their own little world. He knew his eyes had darkened and he looked back to her and she was giving him a look of innocence. He watched as she bit her bottom lip, waiting for his reply.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he breathed out, tightening his hand

around hers.

“We’re just skating, Hop,” she said impishly. “Geez, get your mind out of the gutter.”

Hopper closed his eyes, letting out a deep chuckle as she tugged on him to keep skating. He smiled as he heard Will and El’s laughter picking up again.

They had a lot of bad days, but today...

Today was good.

8. Chapter 8

“I have to call Lonnie,” Joyce said lowly, casting a glance between Jonathan and Hopper.

The two of them bristled at her suggestion, Jonathan sending her a scowl before succumbing to a deep sulk, while Hopper sent her an icy glare and clenched his jaw. Neither of them protested as she collected herself from the couch and made her way to the phone.

Will was alive.

He was back from that awful, hellish world, and he was safely asleep in his room. Joyce desperately wanted to crawl into her own bed and wake up into a reality where everything was back to normal, however, she knew that word would be out soon. Will Byers was back from the dead and Joyce didn’t want Lonnie to be the last to find out.

He wasn’t a good father, but he deserved to know.

Her hand trembled as she dialed his number and she waited as the phone began to ring. She knew it was terrible of her to hope he wouldn’t answer. She wasn’t even sure what to say. Part of her knew that the only reason she felt she should call was on the fact that he *never* answered. She felt safe in knowing that she could feel like she was doing the right thing without actually having to do it. She could justify that she did try to call him and tell him, only that he didn’t answer.

Joyce should have known that would be too easy. For once in his miserable life, Lonnie Byers actually answered the phone.

“Hello?” he asked, sounding as if he had just woken up from a drunken slumber. There was a faint noise in the background that sounded like the television, but it could’ve been his teenager girlfriend yelling something out to him.

“Hey, it’s me,” Joyce said, sighing into the phone. She wasn’t sure if the appropriate reaction was to scream or laugh at the fact he

answered.

Jonathan widened his eyes and shot the Chief a bewildered expression. He also seemed surprised that his father managed to pick up the phone. Hopper understood, pursing his lips at the boy and then looked to Joyce.

“Joyce? Is this about earlier?” Lonnie’s tone shifted to aggression as he recognized the her voice. “I don’t feel like arguing about it. My mind is made up. Will is dead and I’m getting the fucking money.”

“No, it’s not about earlier.” Joyce frowned. “But, like I said, you aren’t doing that. You don’t even have a case anymore.”

“What are you even talking about? Of course I have a case! I don’t need your permission to do this. He was my son, too.” he pointed out to her as he usually did when they had an argument over the kids. He always wanted to claim they were his children when it was convenient for him. Otherwise, it was ‘those kids are your fucking problem, not mine.’

“You don’t have a case because he isn’t dead,” she breathed out. She sounded calm and this surprised her. She felt that all of her frantic and high stress energy and been used up. She felt like a broken record, telling people that Will wasn’t dead, and now for the first time she was saying it to someone and it was one hundred percent true.

“This shit again? Really?” Lonnie cursed into the phone. “Joyce, we had his damn funeral. They found his body. Why are you still being like this?”

“No, Lonnie,” she said. “I’m not being like anything. I’m telling you, Will is alive. He is here at the house!”

“Let me talk to Jonathan,” Lonnie said evenly, the irritation seeping into her ears.

Joyce glanced over at her eldest son. “What? Why?”

“Just give him the phone!”

Joyce motioned for Jonathan to come over to the phone. Her son stood up and walked over, straightening his posture as he prepared to talk to his father.

“Hello?” Jonathan said.

“I fucking told you that your mother needed help,” he spat out. “She’s going crazy and you’re enabling this behavior by not letting me take her to someone who knows how to handle this.”

“She’s not crazy!” Jonathan yelled, suddenly feeling very defensive. “Will is alive!”

“Seriously? Jonathan, tell me you aren’t falling for this shit. This is exactly the reason-”

“Come over here for yourself and see!” Jonathan said. “Mom’s not crazy!”

“Fine,” was all Lonnie muttered before hanging up the phone.

Jonathan slammed the phone on the wall and then turned to look at his mom. She had moved over to the couch and was fumbling with a cigarette.

“Is he coming?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Jonathan admitted, leaning back against the wall and slowly sinking down.

She nodded and lit the cigarette, taking a long drag. She glanced up at Hopper and gave him a small, but tired smile. “You don’t have to stay. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

Hopper rolled his eyes. “You were ready to murder Lonnie last time he was here. I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

“I think we can manage,” Jonathan cut in, sending Hopper an annoyed glare.

“Yeah? Well, tough shit, because I’m not leaving.”

The teenager scowled at him before standing up hastily. He muttered something about going to check on Will and left the room. Hopper gave a low sigh, but he knew not to take the kid's anger personally. He knew his relationship with his dad was shitty, and he almost lost his brother, so tensions were understandably high.

Joyce and Hopper were met with a small silence after the sound of the door clicking shut to Will's room. Hopper began to pull out his own cigarettes and cast a glance around the house. It truly was a wreck. The letters were still all over the wall. The Christmas lights were still dangled all around. Plus, the hallways had clearly been lit on fire so there was that mess now to deal with. Although Hopper disliked Lonnie, he had to admit that to an outsider, the house did look a little...off.

"Hop, you really don't have to stay," Joyce said softly.

He turned towards her and gave a small shrug. "I want to stay."

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was sincere that is made his chest feel incredibly heavy.

"Joyce, really, it's nothing," he shook his head at her.

"No, not for this. Well- yes, for this, but-" she stumbled a bit and then gave him a shy smile. "I mean thank you for believing me. Nobody believed me. They all thought- still think- that I'm crazy for the things I've been saying."

"Hey, you're not crazy. You were right." he said, placing a large hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, you found out I was right because you actually believed me. You risked everything- your career, your *life*- all because of the insane things I was saying that nobody else believed. I just- thank you. Hopper, really, *thank you*." her voice cracked and she felt herself starting to tear up. "My boy is alive because of you."

Hopper wasn't sure how to respond to this. He hadn't expected Joyce to be so sincere with him, but he should have seen it coming. Joyce was an emotional person. She was good at telling people how she felt

and making them feel her words. She had no problem expressing if she was angry or upset. She never cared if the way she felt made her seem weak to others. It was something Hopper had always admired her for. He was terrible at expressing how he felt. He was good at pushing people away and bottling everything up inside.

“Wasn’t just me who saved him,” he said lightly.

Although it had been a long time since they had been around each other, Joyce knew that Hopper wasn’t comfortable with moments like this. She knew his mind was on Eleven. She could see the pain eating away at him when they learned of her demise. He clearly wasn’t okay, and she knew she shouldn’t push him into this, but she really just wanted to help him.

“She was a brave girl. I feel awful that she sacrificed herself for us.”

Hopper shifted at her statement, tensing a little. “There was no other way.”

“I know,” Joyce said. “We all had to make a lot of choices, and not all of them were easy. I just- I want you to know that it’s okay to feel awful about how things ended for her, but you shouldn’t blame yourself. Her death isn’t on you.”

Hopper recoiled at her words and he stood up abruptly. “Jesus, Joyce. I’m not...I don’t feel guilty. I did what had to be done and your son is back, so can we just drop it?”

“No,” she said simply. “I want you to know that I’m here for you, like how you’ve been there for me these past few days. I can see that you’re hurting.”

He shook his head. He seemed stunned by her words and she knew that if Lonnie wasn’t possibly coming over, Hopper would have been out the door without looking back.

“I’m fine,” he grumbled out at her.

“Okay,” she sighed, crossing her arms. “You can’t push people away forever, Hop.”

He let out a bitter laugh. "You're really going to lecture me about pushing people away?"

Joyce flinched at the harshness of his tone and frowned. She knew where this conversation was going, and she wasn't really in the mood for decisions she made when they were teenagers. She set her lips in a line and looked away from him. "I doubt Lonnie is going to come. You should just go."

"No," he all but shouted at her. "I push people away, okay? I know that I do. I don't talk about my feelings because it's easier to deal with them myself. But, fine. *Fine* ! Since you're being so damn insistent. I feel like shit. I gave away that little girls location so that we could get your son. She is dead and it's all because I wanted to help *you*," he pacing angrily around her couch and Joyce's eye widened. "I did all of this because I wanted to help you! And I can't help but wonder, why? Why was I willing to risk the life of some little girl just to maybe have the chance to save some little boy? What kind of person does that?"

"Hop-"

"And then it dawned on me. I did it for you. It's always been you, Joyce. I've always been doing stupid shit for you. You consume me. You've always been that way for me. If it had been anyone else's child..."

"You would've done the same thing," Joyce shouted back at him. "You would've done the same damn thing! You didn't do this for me. You did this because you're a good person. You gave away Eleven's location, but you and I both know that you didn't give it away without every intention of protecting her! You did it to get information, but you were going to save them both. That's the kind of person you are. You weren't okay with her death and that's why it hurts! If you were a bad person, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. But, if it really makes you feel that much better, go ahead and blame me. I can handle it. Just leave and let me deal with Lonnie first and then you can have your turn next!"

The silence that followed her words was painful.

Hopper looked at her with wide eyes. He looked utterly hurt and he was staring at her in shock. His mouth was slightly ajar and he simply seemed to stunned to know what to say. Joyce felt her own pulse thudding heavily from getting worked up. She knew she shouldn't have said that. She shouldn't have pushed him to this point, but dammit, she just wanted to help him! Comparing him to Lonnie was cruel, but Hopper seemed to think that he was an awful person for his choices. If he wanted to act like he was just some awful lowlife, than he should be able to handle being compared to the likes of her ex husband.

Joyce was staring at Hopper, her eyes challenging him to see that he wasn't like that.

Before she could register anything, Hopper was back to the couch and pulling her into a hug.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her hair. "I don't blame you. I just- I'm an idiot."

Joyce remained tense for a short second and then relaxed into his hug and ran a comforting hand along his back.

"You're not a bad man, Hop," she whispered. "I've known enough bad men in my life, and I promise you aren't one."

"Do you think..." he began to wonder out loud. "Do you think there is a chance that she's still out there?"

As he finished his question, there was a loud pounding sound from the door, followed by several curses from Lonnie Byers. Joyce sprung to her feet and shot Hopper an apologetic look before moving to open the door. Hopper stood up and followed her, registering the sound of Jonathan emerging from Will's room.

Joyce hadn't really registered his question quick enough before Lonnie arrived. She didn't think there was any chance the girl was still alive. The way the children described her battle with that creature made her feel certain Eleven was gone. There was no way someone could survive that.

Hopper, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. The only thing he was sure of was that he wasn't like Lonnie.

Joyce was right...He wasn't a bad man.

He didn't give up on people.

And he certainly wasn't going to give up on Eleven.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, I was thinking about doing a second chapter on this and basically showing Lonnie's reaction to Will being alive. What do you all think? Yay or Nay ...
Thanks for all the support!!

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

Ask and you shall receive! Here is part 2 of the last chapter, focusing on Lonnie coming to see that Will is alive.

Notes for the Chapter:

There is a lot of cursing in this chapter, so if that bothers you, you've been warned.

Enjoy! :)

“Joyce!” Lonnie tried to turn the door knob, only to confirm that it was locked. “Joyce! Open the goddamn door!”

He pounded his fists onto the wooden door and found himself growing increasingly impatient. It was cold as shit outside and his ex wife seemed to be taking her sweet ass time. Lonnie moved his hand to try and open it again, when Joyce swung the door open.

She looked a bit flustered as looked up at him. “Lonnie?” she said, her body blocking his entrance to the house. Her brown doe eyes were staring at him with bewilderment.

He rolled his eyes at her stance and walked through her, shoving her to the side so that he could walk inside. “Don’t act so surprised to me, babe.”

He entered the house, shivering as he realized that inside wasn’t much warmer than out. The house pretty much looked the same as when Joyce had pitched a bitch fit and thrown him out. He saw Jonathan glaring daggers at him as usual. He was lingering in the hallway and seemed like he was just looking for a fight. Kid was always pissed off at him for something. It was fucking annoying. So what if he wasn’t winning any ‘father of the year’ awards...Did that mean the boy had to act like he was a monster?

Lonnie cut his eyes away from Jonathan, deciding to let it slide, and

then realized something quite obvious. If it had been a snake, he would have been dead twenty times over. -Shit, maybe he was drunker than he thought. The chief of fucking police was sitting on the couch, giving him a death glare that matched Jonathan's.

"Hopper?" Lonnie couldn't hide the confusion in his voice. "What the hell?" he spun around to look at Joyce, who had shut the door and was approaching him. "You called the police? Are you serious?"

Joyce furrowed her brow and shook her head. "No, just listen-"

"I'm sorry about all this, Jim," Lonnie said sincerely. "Joyce just isn't in a good place right now. That's why I'm here. She called me saying all kinds of crazy shit. Jonathan hasn't been helping matters. Will's death has hit us all hard, you see? They *really* shouldn't have called you and bothered you at this hour."

Hopper just stared at him, trying to think of how he was going to try and respond. He could already sense that this wasn't going to end well. Besides, Hopper certainly didn't feel like responding with words...

Luckily, Jonathan seemed to have a lot to say to his father. "Hopper's here because he helped us find Will. He didn't give up and he found him."

"Yeah," Lonnie agreed, glancing over at Hopper with exasperation. "He found his body in the fucking lake."

"No, that's just what you want! You'd rather he be dead so that you can get that money!"

Lonnie sent a glare in Joyce's direction as their son said this. Why was she always telling Jonathan everything when none of it even concerned him? She treated him like he was an adult when he clearly still behaved like an incompetent little brat. Maybe if he should have pushed harder when the kid was growing up. Joyce always wanted to baby him, and she always intervened when Lonnie tried to show the kid a lesson like his own father had taught him. It was Joyce's fault their kids were a bunch of pansies. Hell, all of this was Joyce's fault.

"You think I want my son dead?" he hissed, jutting a finger at Jonathan. "I told you that I'm not the asshole here. I'm the only one accepting the death and trying to help out all of us. Who do you think I'm trying to get this money for? Your mother is the one that's wasting all the money on these Christmas lights. I mean for fuck's sake, she put a hole in the side of the house trying to find Will! How am I still the bad guy? I'm trying to sue those jackasses and your mom is drawing the fucking alphabet on the wall!"

Joyce bit her lip and frowned as the comment seemed to agitate Jonathan. She sent a wary glance over at Hopper and saw that Lonnie was successfully working both men up.

"All you ever do is gaslight her!" Jonathan screamed. "You've been gaslighting her for years!"

Lonnie laughed.. "Gaslighting? Jonathan, look at the house!"

"If you think Will is dead than why did you even bother coming?"

"You told me to come over, remember? You're starting to sound like her. You both clearly need me to step in."

Jonathan was coming down the hallway now, his fists balling up. "Say one more word about us being crazy."

"Or what? You're going to fight me?" Lonnie smiled at him, patronizing him with a single flash of his teeth. "You really want a rematch after last time? Pretty sure your mother is a better fighter than you. She might cry like a little bitch, but she isn't a *pussy* !"

"Give me a reason, Byers," Hopper stood up, cocking his head to the side. He'd heard enough and had no intention of staying silent anymore. He figured he would let Jonathan get his frustration out, but enough was enough. He wasn't going to sit there and let Lonnie threaten and bully everyone around. "Give me a reason to kick your ass right now and take you to the station."

Lonnie turned to Hopper and was about to open his mouth to say some smart comment when Joyce stepped in.

"Lonnie," Joyce said, physically putting herself between him and the

other two men. Hopper cringed at the movement and wondered how many times she had done that throughout the years. “Just forget this. Will is *here* . He’s in his room. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Joyce started towards his room, not waiting for him to respond, and motioned for Lonnie to follow her. He shook his head, swallowing down his anger that had quickly escalated, and made his way to the hallway. He shot a glance at Jonathan and didn’t even bother looking back at Hopper. He stood and waited for Joyce to open the door.

He felt his stomach drop as he took it in.

Will was there .

His son was there in his room. He was under the covers and he looked like absolute shit. His skin was pale and he honestly resembled a ghost. He had sweat on his forehead and he seemed mildly uncomfortable. He glanced at his wrist and saw the hospital band wrapped around it. Lonnie would have thought that he was dead if he couldn’t clearly see the rise and fall of his chest.

“How?” he asked.

“I told you he was alive,” Joyce said.

“But, how? How the fuck is he alive? His body- They found his damn body!”

“It wasn’t his,” Joyce said, ushering them out of the room as Will began to stir at the sudden loudness of his father’s voice. She was surprised he had managed to stay asleep during all of this, but it just really went to show how exhausted he still was. “They made a mistake.”

“A mistake? How do you make a mistake like that?” he grunted out. He felt like the room was spinning as he tried to wrap his mind around it.

“I don’t know,” she said, glancing down the hallway. She made a face at Hopper, wondering how much she could say. “It doesn’t matter, thought. All that matters is that Will is alive and he’s home.”

Lonnie looked down at her. He was a tall man, towering over her by several inches. His height was something he had always used to intimidate her. She glared up at him and tried to stand her ground.

“Somebody has to pay for this mistake, Joy,” he hissed lowly, stepping closer to her. “You don’t tell me my kid is dead, let me have a damn funeral, and then tell me he isn’t dead without there being some kind of consequences.”

Lonnie stared at her a second longer and she could smell the stench of whiskey wafting from his lips. He sneered at her before barreling down the hallway. Joyce stood in her place and watched as he strode up to Hopper.

“You’re the one that found him!” Lonnie yelled at Hopper, coming to stand face to face with him. Joyce quickly remembered that Hopper was a few inches taller than Lonnie. He never used his size to intimidate her, so she often forgot that he was a giant, even to normal sized people.

“Yes, I found a child’s body. I didn’t identify it. I was told it was Will, and I just reported the information.” Hopper stated calmly. His face remained passive but his hands were twitching.

“Bullshit!” Lonnie spat. “Do you know how much that funeral cost? Am I going to get any money for that since you fuckers are so goddamn inept at doing your job?”

“Everything is always about money with you,” Jonathan shook his head. “You barely even chipped in. I’m the one who had to plan the funeral to begin with.”

Joyce winced with a flash of guilt and Lonnie spun around to look at his son. His face was devoid of any feeling of wrongdoing and only filled with fury. “You told me you saw the body!”

“Lonnie, stop!” Joyce said, moving from the hallway. “We saw the body, and I told you it wasn’t Will. You didn’t believe me-”

“And you! How long has our son been in the hospital? I saw the hospital band on his wrist. How long has he been alive? How long

did you wait to call me and tell me this?"

"I've been telling you for days that he wasn't dead!"

"Yeah," he scoffed. "Forgive me for doubting someone who isn't all that credible."

"Seriously? Lonnie-"

"You can't be trusted, Joyce. I don't care that you were right and that Will's back. It was your shitty parenting that got him lost in the first place! You can't even watch him without him running off or whatever the hell he did. I thought I could leave these kids with you, but it's become obvious I can't. First thing tomorrow, I'm going to have to file for full custody of Will and Jonathan. You're fucking crazy, and with all this..." he gestured wildly to the house. "I doubt I'll have trouble convincing anyone that you're not capable of watching the kids anymore."

"Crazy?" Joyce felt something in her snap. She had gone to hell and back to keep her children safe and she wasn't about to just sit here and let Lonnie come in and threaten her or her children. He couldn't just waltz in and threaten to take them away. "I'm crazy? You keep calling me crazy! Well, *I'll show you fucking crazy!*"

He must have recognized the familiar anger in her eyes and something in him seemed to snap as well.

She felt Lonnie's palm connecting with her face before she could even try to make the first strike. He hit her hard, and she felt her face already stinging from the impact. She stumbled backwards a bit and let out a small cry of pain. She had seen the hit coming from the darkness of his eyes, and yet she still wasn't fast enough to try and block it.

As she opened her eyes and tried to recover herself, she immediately saw Hopper on top of Lonnie. His fist was drawn back and all she could do was watch as his fist pummeled down.

He punched him, the smack of his fist colliding with his face ringing out into the silence.

Lonnie struggled against him and Joyce saw blood trickling down from his brow as Hopper punched him again.

And again.

And again.

And again- until Lonnie wasn't struggling, his body slack against the floor, and Joyce simply couldn't take the sight anymore.

"Hop!" She rushed to him and put her small hand on his arm. He tensed at her touch and then slowly relaxed. His shoulder slugged and he glanced down at Lonnie's still body. His face was already turning purple from fresh bruises and his brow was splattered with spots of red. Joyce took Hopper's fist in her hand and examined it, seeing his own injuries from what he had done to Lonnie.

"Jonathan, get some ice," she told him quickly as Hopper winced from her touch.

Her eldest son was standing silently awe-struck in the corner and nodded, staring at Hopper with wide eyes. He lingered for a second longer before dashing into the kitchen.

Hopper glanced at Joyce, who was still crouching down beside him, and brought his finger up to her lip. He wiped at it and she saw his finger was now painted in blood.

"You're bleeding," he whispered.

He wiped at her lip again and she let him. His hand stayed at her lip for a fraction of a second too long. His blue eyes were looking into hers, searching for some sign that she was upset with him. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, letting him know that it was okay. More than okay, really.

"Here," Jonathan came running back in, causing the two of them to part. He approached Hopper and placed the ice to his hand.

"Sorry, kid," Hopper said lowly, grimacing as he applied the ice-pack.

“Sorry?” Jonathan raised a brow. “I wish you had been around to do that years ago.”

The lightness in his tone was joking, but they all knew how serious his comment was.

Hopper gave him a small smile. “Yeah, me too.”

Jonathan let a smirk tug at his lips and nodded at the Chief. His earlier resentment toward him hanging around was melted away into gratitude.

Joyce, however, wasn’t smiling. She was staring at Lonnie and she was anxiously tugging at the sleeve of her shirt.

“Hey, why don’t you go check on your brother?” Hopper suggested. “No way he’s still asleep now.”

Jonathan stood up and cast a look over to his mom. “Yeah, sure.”

Hopper waited until he was back in Will’s room before turning his attention to Joyce. He watched her for a moment and let out a sigh.

“Joyce.”

She flicked her eyes over to him. “Hop, he can’t- he can’t take them away. He can’t take my boys away from me.”

“He won’t. I promise. I won’t let him.”

Joyce shook her head, tears starting to brim at her eyes. She wasn’t sure how she had any tears left to cry, but they always seemed ready to fall recently. “They’ll believe him. Hop, they’ll believe him over me. They always believed him over me. I don’t- He’s right. Everyone thinks I’m crazy.”

“You’re not,” Hopper said. “You’re *not* crazy, and he isn’t getting anywhere near your kids. I’ll make sure of it.”

“What are you-”

“I’ll make sure of it.” he repeated firmly, gazing at her intently. “He’s

never getting near your kids, and he's never laying another fucking hand on you. Got it?"

"Okay," she said quietly. Her shoulder slumped and she tried to blink away her tears. "I'm so sorry, Jim."

"Stop," he let the ice-pack fall to the ground and gathered her in his arms. "Don't apologize to me for this."

"I just-"

"No, Joyce. You don't ever have to apologize to me," he said. "Go get some rest. I'm going to take care of Lonnie and then I'll come back over in the morning."

Joyce nodded, untangling herself from him and standing up. "You know that you don't have to come back. If you wanted to be done with all of this, I won't hold it against you."

Hopper gave her a long look. Her comment was true. He could walk away from all of this and never look back. He technically didn't have any reason to keep helping. Except the fact that he didn't want to be done with all of this. He didn't care how many people said Joyce was a lunatic, he wasn't going to walk away and let her deal with everything alone. He wanted answers. He wanted to know why all this happened and everything that went down in that lab. He wanted to see if Eleven was still out there.

He didn't want to be done with Joyce.

Hopper almost told her his thoughts. He almost let it all spill out. But instead he began to gather up Lonnie to take into the station.

"I like coffee," he said simply.

Joyce gave him a half smile, watching as he picked up her ex husband. "Coffee sounds good."

10. Chapter 10

Dr. Owens was stepping out of the hospital room as he became increasingly aware of the heavy footsteps that were hot on his trail. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Jim Hopper was joining him in his departure. Dr. Owens let out a soft sigh and snuck a glance at Joyce, who was hovering over her son. She was speaking to the boy softly and running her hands through his hair with a mother's care that warmed the doctor's heart.

He felt sorry for them.

Will wasn't getting any better and it was clearly taking a toll on everyone. They had been coming to regular appointments for some time and if anything, things only seemed to be getting worse. Will was having more episodes and nothing could really be explained.

He watched the pair of them until the door closed and Hopper's massive frame stepped into view.

"Things have to get better," Hopper said, his voice cold and blunt.

The doctor bristled at these words and although he wanted to maintain his professionalism, he couldn't help but to look at Hopper with slight offence. "What exactly do you think I'm trying to do here?"

"I'm not so sure anymore," he crossed his arms and sent a glare that narrowed his usually large blue eyes. Sam Owens was not easily intimidated. He had been dealing with men like Jim Hopper all his life who thought they could play this tough guy act and somehow he could magically present a cure to their problems. Why did people always think doctors were hiding the solution to helping their patients? He wanted to help Will just as much as anyone.

"You want to take the boy somewhere else? Be my guest." Dr. Owens said, rolling his eyes quickly. It was enough to show that he was exasperated, but showed he didn't plan on letting this escalate into something obscene. "We all know how wonderful Chicago was."

“Chicago. Here. Wherever. It doesn’t seem to matter.” he shrugged. “None of you know what the hell you’re doing.”

“You know this isn’t an exact science. At least we know what Will went through. Chicago can’t even begin to know even the most rudimentary basics of the situation, and we both know he won’t get real help there. I know this is hard for everyone, but you have to give this sort of thing time.”

“No- I just- Sam, I really *need* this to get better.”

Dr.Owens blinked, processing why Hopper suddenly sounded so desperate. Gone was his vibrato of a man who meant business, and here he stood as a man who seemed like he was gasping for air. Dr. Owens knew that Will was a child, and that most people wanted to help sick children, but there was something so gut-wrenchingly personal in the way Hopper had uttered those words.

He wasn’t naive enough to miss the tension between Hopper and Joyce. He wasn’t quite sure how anyone could miss it. However, he thought the tension that was excruciatingly palpable between them was simply a passion that didn’t quite go beyond sexual desire. Now, watching Hopper practically drown in front of him, he realized just how clearly he had overlooked the signs.

Hopper was always there, and he certainly didn’t need to be. Dr. Owens wrote it off for the man’s weird, almost obsessive, need to be in control. He needed to be in charge, and Joyce seemed relieved to have him there. Hopper liked power, and he seemed to have no problem walking around this hospital, telling the staff that they needed to work harder. He seemed to do whatever he wanted, except for when Joyce told him otherwise. He was in control, until Joyce stepped in and had something to say. Dr. Owens hadn’t given it too much thought, but maybe he should have.

He should have thought more about the glances they exchanged when he told them news about Will. The way Joyce would look at Hopper like he would know what to do, and how his gaze always seemed to tell her that they would get through this. He should have questioned the way Hopper was always close to her, never leaving her side for too long. If they pulled Joyce out for private information,

it would only be a matter of time before he was tracking her down, always muttering ‘ *just wanted a visual* .’ He should have wondered about how Joyce could fall asleep with her head on Hopper’s shoulder while they sat at Will’s bedside, his arm wrapped around her protectively.

He should have thought about it, and he would have seen how painfully obvious it was...

“You love her.”

Dr. Owens said this softly. He came to the realization so suddenly that he couldn’t help but to say it out loud. He looked at Hopper, unsure of how he would feel about this. The man held his gaze, steady and unyielding, confirming the words he had just spoke.

“Does she know how you-”

“Joyce needs this to be over,” Hopper told him, his voice harsh as he cut him off. “Will needs it to be over, too.”

“You should tell her,” Dr. Owens said carefully.

“It’s been long enough with you’re constant observations and it feels like no real progress has been made.” he ignored him. “I’m trying to be reassuring, but Joyce is liable to walk soon if things don’t start getting better. I don’t know how much more time any of us are willing to give you.”

The threat was empty and they both knew it.

They had no where else to go.

Dr. Owens decided to brush it off and try to steer the conversation towards Joyce. It was lighthearted advice and he truly thought they could make a good couple. They would certainly have passion. “I’ve seen the way she looks as you, and-”

“How about instead of trying to involve yourself in my goddamn personal life, you go and do your job so we never have to come back here again, okay?” Hopper clearly wasn’t discussing the matter with him.

Dr. Owens stood there, watching as Hopper gave him a final hard look and then opened the door forcefully, striding back inside to be with Joyce and Will. He tried to process what he had just discovered and found himself chuckling as he imagined the dance Hopper and Joyce were finding themselves entangled in. He gripped his clipboard and shook his head, thinking about how he could have been so blind.

As much as wanted to continue to ponder about their relationship, Hopper's words were haunting him.

He really needed to help Will Byers.

But, maybe he could try and help Hopper and Joyce along the way.

11. Chapter 11

Joyce was miserable.

Really, she was probably being a bit dramatic, given she had certainly been through much, *much* worse. However, she was cramping so bad in the middle of Melvald's that she truly wanted to curl up into a ball and slip away into nothing. Her period was usually something she managed with mild disdain. She wasn't one to whine and complain her problems, but today was proving to be a challenge. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so drained from it.

"Joyce!" Donald called out to her from the back. "Can you start tagging the items in aisle nine before you clock out? Just make sure you keep watch on the register in case someone comes in!"

"Yeah," she yelled halfheartedly.

Joyce grimaced and moved from behind the counter. She trudged her way to the aisle and began to tag the items that were going on discount. She felt like she had practically tagged every single item in the store since the mall had opened up and swept away all regular business. Donald had been increasingly stressed and seemed to be on edge all the time.

She was trying to be accommodating, her own worry starting to fester as she realized all the business at the mall might result in her needing a new job, but he was really starting to become a tyrant. If she did one thing wrong, she was subjected to a speech on her work ethic and how she needed to be working harder than ever or he might have to look into cutting the staff back. It was an idle threat and they both knew it. There was only one other employee that had managed to hold onto their job, and with such a small staff, Joyce knew that the only way she was going to lose her job was when Melvald's officially ran out of business. But, this didn't stop him from going on and on about how important it was they be at the top of their game.

"Oh, and Joyce!" Donald shouted. "I need you to pick up a double

tomorrow!”

Joyce let out a sigh. She certainly needed the money, but the thought of being on her feet another minute was excruciating. She wasn't sure she could handle a double shift tomorrow. She wasn't even sure she could handle what was left of this shift.

She was tagging the items in the aisle, mulling over this information when she heard the bells at the front door chime out. Donald yelled out her name again, as if she was not capable of hearing the bells herself. She bit her lip in annoyance and made her way out to the front of the store.

She smiled as she saw Hopper standing near the register, his back to her. He was in his police uniform, his brown pants tight and alluring. She couldn't help but let her eyes trail down his figure, resting her gaze to check out his ass. She bit the inside of her cheek and continued to take in his form.

She gulped.

First she was in pain, and now she unbelievably horny. *Seriously, just at the sight of him?* She scolded herself, trying to gain some type of control of the scandalous thoughts now racing in her mind.

He must have heard her approaching because he turned around and gave her a big grin.

“Hello, stranger,” he greeted her, a mischievous glint in his eyes. She immediately recognized that he was in a playful mood. It was refreshing that things had fallen back into routine after everything with the Russians and whole mall fiasco. Hopper almost died, and she wasn't sure how things would go from there. She wasn't sure if he would really still want to go out with her, but, true to his word, they went on their date to Enzo's and everything had been smooth sailing from there.

“What can I help you with today, Chief?” she asked innocently, trying to go along with him.

He beamed down at her and bent down to give her a quick kiss.

"You're going to get me in trouble," she whispered, motioning to the back where Donald was rummaging around.

Hopper gave her an unimpressed look. "You're technically off the clock now."

She gave him a tired smile and walked past him to grab her belongings. She called out to Donald that she would see him in the morning and she waited until she heard his grumbled reply. She felt Hopper's eyes on her as she walked past him and out towards his car.

"You look a little pale," he commented as he opened the car door for her, a frown forming on his perfect face. "You feeling okay?"

"I'm always pale," she shrugged and climbed into the seat.

He seemed unconvinced and pursed his lips. He shut her door and walked around. He got into the seat, starting the car and quickly pulling them out of the parking lot. He gave her a sideways glance, still filled with complete skepticism about her appearance.

"I'm just exhausted today," she offered, knowing he wasn't going to let it go.

"You haven't been sleeping well?" he asked, alarm rising in his voice. She grimaced, knowing he was thinking of the nightmares she had told him about what felt like so long ago.

"No, it's not that. Really, Hop, I'm okay."

"You know that you can call out sick? They invented sick days for a reason."

"I knew I could make it through the shift, and I did," she sent him a mild glare. "I don't need a lecture. I've been doing this without you long enough to manage myself. You don't need to come and tell me to take a sick day like you're the boss of me. That's the exact opposite of what I want you to do. Besides, I'm not even sick, so stop worrying about it in general."

"I know- just- I was just asking," he seemed affronted by her sudden

irritated tone.

She closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry. I don't- I'm not sick. I shouldn't have snapped at you. It's just been a really long day and I really am tired of standing on my feet. I just want to go home and not think about working a double tomorrow."

Hopper made an annoyed grunt. "That asshole is really making you work another double? Joyce, you seriously gotta tell Donald to fu-"

"I need the money, and it's not like he has anyone else to do it." she reminded him before he could finish his opinion.

"You just look like you're ready to fall on your face."

"Gee, thanks, Hopper." she said. "You've really been giving me loads of compliments tonight. It's no wonder I'm letting you stay in my bed tonight."

He winced at her sarcasm and apologized immediately. "I didn't mean it like that. I meant that Donald is overworking you. You can keep telling me you aren't sick, but cut me some slack, I know you aren't feeling good."

She looked over at him and bit her lip in contemplation. Should she tell him? They hadn't been dating that long and she knew some men didn't want to know about women and their 'issues'. But, Hopper wasn't like that, was he? Lonnie certainly was. He didn't want to know, and he often accused her of being a total bitch when he found out it was her time of the month. It often caused a lot of problems, and she really didn't want this to be a problem. Maybe she should just have him drop her off at home and let him think she was coming down with something.

No, Hopper wasn't like that.

At least, she hoped he wasn't like that.

"I'm on my period," she said, hating herself for sounding so juvenile.

"What?" Hopper widened his eyes and glanced over at her with shock.

"I've been cramping all day. I've randomly felt light-headed on and off, and I just want to go home and cry for thirty minutes and then I'll be good to go," she sighed, refusing to make eye contact with him. "That's why I look like shit. I feel like it."

Hopper was silent for all of five seconds and Joyce was already regretting saying anything at all. Clearly she had been wrong and he was probably thinking of ways to get out of sleeping with her tonight.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have- I don't know why I told you that. I understand if you don't want to stay over and I'm sorry that I've been acting bitchy."

"Why wouldn't I want to stay?" he gave her a confused look.

Joyce opened her mouth, her cheeks starting to burn.

"When we get to your place, I'll make you a bubble bath," he said thoughtfully. "I think you still have some wine left from the other weekend, so I'll get you a glass of that, too. Don't worry about dinner or anything. I'll have Jonathan call in some take out. I'm sure El and Will won't mind. You can take some time and just decompress."

Joyce was left flabbergasted in the passenger seat, unsure of how to even reply. She figured at best that Hopper would be indifferent towards the situation. It never occurred to her that he would want to do something like this for her.

"What about later?" she found herself asking, her cheek flushing crimson as she thought of how tight his ass looked in those pants.

His eyes were on the road, but she could see the desire pooling in them as he heard her question. "Well, I've been planning on eating you out all day, so I'm pretty sure that's what'll happen later."

"Oh," Joyce breathed out, smiling a little. "Okay."

"All that sound good?"

"It sounds perfect, Hop."

“Hey,” he reached out his hand to hold hers. “You don’t have to be afraid to tell me anything. Okay?”

Joyce squeezed his hand, nodding.

She really didn’t know what she did to deserve him.

12. Chapter 12

"I wasn't jealous," Hopper scowled, crossing his arms. He sank into the couch, the new cushions feeling soft beneath him. He felt Joyce snuggle up next to him, her cold skin pressing onto his warm. He immediately adjusted his arms and wrapped them around her, pulling her closer. He never understood how she could always be so cold.

"Oh, please!" Joyce giggled. "You were thinking about Scott Clark more than I was."

"I was not," he grumbled again, his face not quite portraying how done he wanted to be with this conversation. He looked down at Joyce and fought urge to smile as he saw her nose crinkling with amusement.

"You were jealous," she poked him playfully. "You kept mentioning him even when we were in the middle of the woods with..."

Hopper sighed and rolled his eyes, quickly giving in before she could start to think about Alexei. That was a topic that never ended well and he was sure neither of them wanted to talk about the death of the Russian man. "Okay, okay. Maybe, in some subconscious way I was a little bit bothered, but I *wasn't* jealous."

"I'll take this as a small victory," she relented, leaning up to give him a peck on the cheek. "I just still don't understand why you would be jealous of Scott Clark."

"Really?" Hopper couldn't believe her sometimes. It seemed so obvious to him. He had been so angry at her for standing him up to be with another man and he didn't understand how she didn't see how Scott Clark was exactly the thing he was afraid of.

"He certainly doesn't have your muscle," Joyce ran her index finger along the length of his forearm, her touch causing him to stiffen with pleasure.

"He's pretty brilliant," he said softly. He was using the same words she had used to describe Scott. The same words that made his blood

boil and his heart feel like it was going to ripped out of his chest.

Joyce picked up her finger and frowned. "Yeah, he's smart." She was studying him, her brow furrowed as she tried to think why he would choose to say that. He watched as her beautiful brown eyes widened with realization and she started to pull away. "That's why you were jealous..."

She picked one smart man, and why wouldn't she pick another one? Bob the Brain was out of the picture, but that didn't mean Joyce wouldn't still want to go for some genius nerd that could actually relate to Will. Murray has even said it in the car. Hopper probably reminded her of a bad relationship.

Hopper wasn't like Bob Newby or Scott Clark.

And that terrified him.

He thought he was finally breaking through with Joyce and then instead of going to Enzo's, she was going to Scott to ask him for help on those goddamn magnets.

"Jim," she breathed out, and then suddenly she was back to him, throwing her leg over him to straddle him. "Scott is brilliant, but he isn't *you*."

Hopper felt her lips against his and he closed his eyes.

"Scott Clark wouldn't have been able to do half of the things you did," she whispered, pulling his bottom lip with her teeth. His hands sank to grab hold of ass and he gave it an encouraging squeeze. "He couldn't have beat up those men. He certainly wouldn't have been able to find out half the information you did. Scott doesn't know anything about Larry, and he doesn't know Murray. He wouldn't have been able to save us."

"Yeah," he shrugged, shifting his gaze to look away from her. "Doesn't mean I wasn't worried."

"I kind of liked seeing you jealous," Joyce admitted, a sly smile pulling at her lips.

Hopper flicked his eyes back to her and have a low chuckle. “Really? You said I was being a gigantic ass.”

“Oh, well you were,” she nodded.. “But it also made me realize how serious you were about me. You’ve never really been the jealous type.”

Hopper smiled at her and ran his hands up to her hips. “Usually I feel secure in where in where I stand in a woman’s life.”

“I don’t make you feel secure?” she opened her mouth and let out a mock gasp. Hopper shook his head and pulled her closer, pressing a series of kisses onto her neck. Joyce let out a more genuine gasp this time, her head falling back to give him more access. He trailed his lips up her neck, slowly pressing kiss after kiss until he reached her jawline. The feeling of his beard against her skins made her flush with arousal. Before she could react, Hopper pushed her off him and suddenly had her pinned down beneath him.

His lips were back to hers, and she felt his tongue pressing in, begging for entrance. She parted her lips and halfheartedly tried to suppress a groan as he swirled his tongue inside her mouth. She felt his hips pressing down into her, the feeling of his own arousal increasingly present. He had one hand supporting his weight, and the other was moving cradle her hip. He slowly drug it up her stomach and was soon cupping her breast. While her mind was starting to become a fuzzy mess, she brought her hands up to push him away and try and regain some sense of control.

“Well, you make me feel secure,” she told him sincerely, her breathing still slightly erratic. His eyes were dark as he looked down at her, his hand wandering back up her stomach. “You make me feel safe, and that’s something a man like Scott Clark could never do.”

Hopper grinned down at her, her words hitting him deep. He thought back to the lab when he opened up and told her how important that was to him. Joyce had been through hell, and all he wanted was to make her feel safe. He wasn’t a genius like Scott Clark, or a saint like Bob Newby, but he was *exactly* what she wanted.

13. Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce gets shot instead of Alexei :(

“Shit, you’re bleeding” Hopper cursed, his large hands moving frantically up her body. He pressed onto her stomach, the red pouring from the wound painting a screaming scarlet color onto him with ease. “ *Shit !*”

“Hop...” she whined out his name, her lip trembling. “You have to go. You have to get to the kids.”

He was painfully aware of Murray and Alexei standing behind him, their eyes wide with horror. Murray’s white shirt was covered with her blood, and his face was pale. Alexei had tears in his eyes, but there was a mask of rage bubbling over. They were standing there, seemingly in shock.

“Jim...” Murray’s voice broke out and Hopper felt the chills running up his spine and he fought the urge to retch.

He couldn’t remember how they got here.

One moment everything was fine. They were going on a date to Enzo’s and then all of the sudden those damn magnets starting falling....He couldn’t think straight. Everything had been too much... They were just at the fair to see if the kids were there. That’s all. They just wanted to find their children and the fucking Russians were there instead.

He only left her side for a second.

He should’ve known better.

He was fucking cursed.

He was a black-hole.

“Jesus, *fuck* , Joyce!” he hissed out harshly. “We aren’t leaving you

behind, got it? I'm not leaving you here to die!"

Joyce let out a sigh and fluttered her eyes. He could feel her body going limp and the panic in him began to rise.

"You have to go get help!" He screamed out at the men who were staring behind him. Alexei was muttering something in Russian, his fists clenched as he stared at Joyce. "Stop standing there and do something! Go get the car!"

"Okay, y-yeah, help." Murray stumbled over his words. Hopper heard him speak to Alexei, and soon the two were gone, their voices growing faint.

"Joyce," his hand went up to her face and he fought the urge to cringe at the blood that covered his hands. "Open your eyes. You have to keep your eyes open."

"Hurts..." she whispered.

"I know, I know. You just gotta hang on. Okay? You have to hang on, Joyce."

He didn't even realize that the tears were forming in his eyes until it was too late, the feeling of them gliding down his face made him feel worse.

"I need you to stay," he said. "I can't- I can't do this without you. Any of this. I need you to stay."

"He shot me," she opened her eyes slowly, the pain etched onto her features made his heart clench.

"Yeah, he did," he nodded, sliding his hands underneath her.

"He shot me," she repeated, the severity of her situation seeming to sink in as she breathed out shakily, her hands trembling. "I'm...cold."

"Shit!" he scrambled, quickly removing his shirt. He took his shirt and wrapped her in it, pulling her close. "I'm going to pick you up now and take you to the car, okay?"

"The kids..." she said, letting out a small cry as he lifted her up. Her body felt small and frail against his, and he felt himself letting out a stream of curses as he realized a swarm of people had surrounded them, likely gathered because of all the shouting he had with Murray and Alexei. He ignored them, shoving his way past them, cradling Joyce in his arms. Most of them parted for him, whispering to each other in panic.

"The kids are going to have to wait just a bit longer," he spoke softly. "We're going to get you to the hospital."

Her failure to argue made him all that much more concerned. He was practically sprinting to the car, and as he approached, he screamed at Murray to get them there as quick as possible. He was then in the back seat, Joyce laying limply against him.

"Do you think-" Murray started to say, but Hopper was having none of it. He could see their grave faces and he couldn't handle hearing what they had to say.

"Just drive!" he said, the seriousness of his voice deafening. He heard the roar of the engine as Murray pressed on the gas.

Alexei said something to Murray, and the man glanced at Joyce in the car mirror before giving a small shake of his head. Hopper couldn't bring himself to ask what they were saying, so he looked down at Joyce and tried to keep her awake.

"Hey, you gotta talk to me. Just keep talking so I know you're still with us."

She stirred a little and opened her eyes. "Did you kill him? The man...who shot me?"

"Yes." he said gruffly, looking at her.

She nodded slightly and her eyes started to close again.

"Keep talking," he ordered her gently.

She let out a small whimper, and he could tell she was trying her hardest to do as he asked. She kept them closed for a moment, and he

was about to tell her again when she opened her eyes wider than before. "I'm sorry, Hopper. I'm so sorry."

The sight knocked the breath out of him and he opened his mouth. "Joyce. Stop apologizing. Everything is going to be okay."

"I wanted to go on that date with you," she said. "I wanted to go."

This knocked him even further off his feet. That's really what she was apologizing for right now?

"Okay, I know. I know how you feel, Joyce. That's why it's been frustrating, because I know how you feel. But don't apologize, got it? We're going to go on that date, and everything is going to be okay. We're going to find the kids and we will figure everything out."

"If I don't make it, you have to tell Will and Jonathan--"

"*Stop*, " he shouted at her, cutting her off. "You're not going to die!"

"Jim-" Murray tried to intervene, the heaviness in the way he said his name was like a punch to the gut.

"Drive the car!" he roared up at him before glancing back to Joyce, his hands caressing her hair.

Her eyes were closing, and he felt his tears starting to fall again.

"You're not going to die..." he whispered. "You're not going to die..."

Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize for the lack of updates. I've been super busy... Hopefully I can try and update more soon! Let me know if you enjoyed the angst :)

14. Chapter 14

Summary for the Chapter:

Pt 2- Joyce wakes up in the hospital

She tried to peel her eyes open slightly, slowly welcoming the bright light that pierced her vision. All she could see was white. She remembered pain and so much red...She could remember voices, the feeling of hands cradling her. She had been so cold, and now she felt like she was on fire. She felt like her body was dripping in sweat, and she didn't understand why all she was able to see was harsh light.

Where was she? She tried desperately to open her eyes fully and heard a small whimper.

Oh, God, that's me.

The sound of herself crying out brought in a rush of memories. They had been at the fair. The Russians had shown up, and she was with Murray and Alexei. They hadn't known what was happening until it was too late. That Russian man shot her. He shot her and she couldn't move. She remembered Alexei grabbing onto his shoulders, tackling the man with the gun to the ground. Alexei was screaming out to Murray, who then was running over to her, his hands immediately shooting to her stomach. It was then that she felt the pain. She felt her knees give out, and everything had become so blurry...She could still make out Hopper barreling towards them. The sound of expletives from his mouth...

She couldn't remember what happened after that.

She was trying to recall what happened, her memory a haze. There were snippets she could make out, but everything was incoherent. She was still trying to open her eyes, the struggle to do so was becoming overwhelming and she wanted to give up. She was almost convinced to succumb back into the slumber that called out to her when she remembered the whole reason they went to the fair to begin with.

The children.

Her eyes flicked open at that.

“Will! Jonathan!” she cried out, their names coming out of her mouth so quietly that it shocked her. She tried to push herself up as she called out, immediately groaning at the pain that engulfed her entire abdomen.

“Joyce!” Hopper’s voice came out rushed, his body immediately at her side. His hands were on her and he was already gently guiding her back down. “Shh, it’s okay. You can’t move like that.”

“The kids?” she insisted, her mind swirling as she twisted her face in pain, her own hand flying to her stomach as she let out a harsh breath.

“They’re okay,” he was looking down at her with a mixture of emotions that she couldn’t even begin to comprehend in her state. “Everything’s okay.””

She nodded at him, the relief of this news easing her down from the anxiety that was building up. She blinked a few times, her eyes still adjusting to the fluorescence of the hospital room.

“You’ve been out for two days,” he said, shaking his head slowly in disbelief. “You were rushed into surgery when we got here, and...” the tightness of his body frightened her. His eyes were dark, and he looked down at her as if his entire life depended on this moment. “I had to leave to go to the kids, and they... they weren’t sure if you were going to make it.”

Joyce tried to process this, but it was hard to wrap her mind around. She had really been unconscious for two days? Where were her boys? Where did Hopper even go to find the kids? Where was El? Had they really solved this entire ordeal while she had been here at the hospital? Had she really almost died? There were so many questions she had, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask them. She was increasingly becoming aware of the pain, and she could feel the drugs impacting her. Everything felt a bit dizzy, and she felt lethargic as she simply watched Hopper with large eyes.

"I thought I was going to lose you," his hand tentatively went to hers, and he hovered, looking for confirmation that it was okay. "You had me worried sick, Joyce. Still am."

Joyce gave him a small smile, opening her hand for him to take. His fingers locked with hers, and she felt her smile grow as she remembered the way his hand felt on the fair ride. It was so much bigger than hers, so much rougher. Yet, she felt safe in his hand. She felt protected. His hand clasped around her and she gave him a small squeeze.

"I should've listened to you to begin with," he told her, a sad smile pulling onto his own lips. "I've been acting like such an ass because I was hurt, but then, *I almost lost you.*"

"You didn't," she said, forcing herself to speak. "I'm still here, Hop."

"I almost did," he repeated, his eyes misty.

She squeezed his hand again, looking up into his eyes. He was staring down at her, the openness and vulnerability taking her breath away. She felt his other hand come up to her face, his thumb rubbing against her cheek. The motion was comforting, and she felt her eyes closing.

"It's been hell without you," he said, a bit of lightness about him. She could imagine a smirk tugging at his lips and was tempted to peek a glimpse, but the rhythmic movement of his thumb was just so comforting. "I'm not good with all these emotions, and let me tell you, *everyone* has been emotional. Even Murray was in here balling his eyes out."

Joyce tried to imagine Hopper offering comfort to everyone and she started to laugh. However, the laughter died on her lips as soon as it came, swiftly being replaced by a blunt wince.

"I need to get the doctor," Hopper said suddenly, his hand starting to pull her away. "They need to know you're awake. I'll also call Murray and tell him to bring the kids. They just went home about half an hour ago... I'll be right back."

“Wait,” she tightened her grip on him, making him stay. He looked down at her, his face filled with alarm. She licked her lips and ignored the dryness of her throat. “Did I ruin your shirt?”

“What?” he furrowed his brow.

“That ridiculous shirt you had,” she attempted to have some humor in her voice, but she really just sounded exhausted. She was trying her best to make him not worry. She could feel the stress radiating from him, and usually it was her job to be full of anxiety and his to reassure. She was positive the only reason she wasn’t losing her mind with sheer panic right now was because of the drugs.

Joyce couldn’t imagine what she would have done if the situation was reversed. She also knew that he didn’t do well with hospitals. She was in considerable pain, but she wanted him to know she was okay.

She wanted him to know she was still here.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, shrugging a bit. A confused expression still painted on his face. “But don’t worry about it. It wasn’t important.”

“You need to get a new one,” she said, the demand in her tone clearly evident, despite the low volume. “For our date.”

There was a brief silence that followed, and she didn’t need to open her eyes to know he was shocked by her words. She could imagine his eyes widening and his mouth parting, trying to think of how to respond.

“You still want to go...” his disbelief was mixed with a tinge of boyish excitement.

“Yeah, I do,” she smiled softly, the darkness calling out to her as she desperately tried to stay awake. He must have noticed her struggle, because she felt him straighten up and his uneasiness was beginning to radiate once more.

“As soon as you get out of here, we can go out whenever you’d like” he was speaking quickly. “But first, let’s focus on getting you better, yeah?”

She agreed easily enough, nodding her head slightly, her mind becoming garbled. She felt his hand pull away from hers and she was left listening to the faint sound of the door clicking shut. She desperately wanted to stay awake. She wanted to show him that he could stop worrying. She didn't want to make this harder on him than it already had to be. But, she was losing the fight, and she simply didn't have the energy to try and wait for him to come back.

She faded back to sleep before he returned.

Notes for the Chapter:

This was honestly kind of hard to write, so I really hope it doesn't let you guys down...
Let me know what you think!

15. Chapter 15

Summary for the Chapter:

Set before season 2...

Joyce is pretty sure Hopper likes her.

“What are you doing for dinner tomorrow?” Joyce found herself asking tentatively, her eyes wandering up to stare into his. She swore his eyes reminded her of the ocean, and it was oh so easy to get lost in his sea. She found that she didn’t mind drowning in his eyes. The openness in them brought her a comfort that she couldn’t quite describe.

His leg was practically touching hers, their closeness making her mind feel empty and yet swirling with a million thoughts all at once.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he brought his hand up to the back of his head, rubbing gently. It was a nervous tick of his. One of the few he actually had. He didn’t get nervous often. She noticed this about him, and he seemed to do it a lot around her. She had been observing a lot about him recently, little traces of their youth ever present. She remember how he would do the same thing in high school, rubbing his head as he tried to think of how to reply to someone.

She was surprised at how tense he suddenly seemed to get at her inquiry. Her question seemed to have caught him completely off-guard. She thought she was reading the signs correctly. He had been coming to her work almost daily, stopping by to eat lunch with, or sometimes to just check in and see how she was doing. He was showing up to her house, offering to fix the things that had been destroyed from all the events with the Upside Down. He always seemed to be there for her, and she was almost certain that Jim was interested in her.

She could obviously see how nervous he got around her. The way he would stare at her as if she were a dazzling star in the sky. She felt this pull towards him, and she felt like he did too. When they were together, things just felt easy. She knew she could confide in him. She felt like she could trust him, and she definitely didn’t trust easily. He

genuinely listened to her, and he didn't dismiss her concerns. He looked at her like she was normal, like she had value...

She wasn't sure why he wasn't make the first move, and she was getting a bit impatient waiting on him. That's why she decided today at lunch she would finally ask Hopper out for a proper date.

"Well, I was just thinking..." she felt very unsure of herself now, biting her lip. She saw his eyes flicker down, lingering for just a second too long. A slight blush threatened to bloom across her cheeks and she gave him a shy smile. "If you aren't doing anything..."

Hopper blinked, looking down at her with an emotion she couldn't place. He stayed silent, his eyes quickly making their way to their lunch that sat on the bench. He was taking too long to formulate and answer, and she knew what that meant. Joyce felt herself flinch, quickly reaching for the food as something else to focus on. She quickly unwrapped the sandwich and began looking through its contents as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

"Joyce, I-" he seemed a bit flustered, a clear amount of pain on his face as he clearly was trying to come up with a nice way to let her down gently. "I don't think-"

She was such an idiot.

"Just forget I said anything!" she cut him off quickly, trying desperately to hide her embarrassment.

How could she be so stupid? Why would Hopper like her? She really had nothing a man like him would want. Two children, an asshole ex, irrational anxiety... Why did she think lunch meant he liked her? Friends have lunch all the time. Friends check in on you. Hopper was just a friend. He could have any woman in town he wanted and she really thought Jim Hopper could ever want someone like her? Someone so broken, so damaged, so... *crazy*.

He just feels bad for you.

She was such an idiot.

Joyce stood up suddenly, knowing that her face was flushed. She

couldn't bring herself to look at him as she tried to come up with some excuse to flee.

"Joyce, wait," Hopper started, but she couldn't stomach the thought of hearing the truth. She could accept that he didn't want her, but she certainly didn't want to hear it from him right now.

"I have to go. I, uh... Donald has been complaining about me taking too long of lunch breaks and I'm not super hungry," she turned on her heel, practically sprinting to the store so that she could try and hide out in shame.

She couldn't believe how wrong she had been. She really thought Hopper liked her. But, of course, she had to go and ruin it. He was trying to be nice to her and she really thought... Joyce fought the urge to cry, shaking her head.

What she didn't know was when she left Hopper on the bench, an overwhelming sense of anger and sadness took over him.

He wanted to go to dinner. He wanted to say yes. He wanted Joyce so much. But it wasn't safe. There was still a lot going on, and he had to keep her safe. As much as it pained him, he had to keep her at arm's length.

She couldn't be with him. It was simply too dangerous right now.

She couldn't know about El...

He cared too much about Joyce to put her at any kind of risk.

Hopper let out a deep sigh, trying to reassure himself that this was the only way to keep everyone safe.

Notes for the Chapter:

I broke my own heart writing this tbh

16. Chapter 16

Summary for the Chapter:

Christmas fun !

The Christmas lights were bright, shining a variety of colors into the night sky. The air was cold and the snow was lightly beginning to flurry all around them. Joyce could feel her face flushing from the chill but she couldn't quite fight the smile off her face. Will and El simply looked so happy, and the sight them brought her so much delight.

"You look beautiful," she felt his breath in her ear, the stubble on his face rubbing against her skin.

She glanced up at him and shook her head, accepting the cup of warm hot chocolate he got for the two of them to share.

"Will is showing El how to make a s'more, but she keeps catching the marshmallows on fire. I think this is their fifth attempt already."

"Yeah? I prefer mine that way."

"You and Jonathan can have all the burnt marshmallows you want," she said. "Some of us have standards."

"Oh, so you're a marshmallow snob?"

"Hmm, I guess I am." She laughed. She brought the hot drink to her lips and took a small sip. She let out a soft hum of appreciation and offered the cup to Hopper. His fingers brushed hers as he took the cup from her grasp. He took a swig from the drink, immediately making a less than pleased face.

"Oh, and I'm the snob?" she teased him, nudging his shoulder playfully.

"I think hot chocolate should be made with milk, not water. If that makes me a snob..."

"It definitely does." she took the drink back from him. "I'm not complaining. It means more for me."

Hopper grinned down at her. He watched her for a moment and he noticed her slight shivering from the cold. He had his jacket off and draped over her shoulders before she could even protest.

"Hop," she frowned at him, adjusting the oversized jacket with her free hand. "Its freezing, you need this."

He shook his head and brought a kiss to her forehead. His lips were chapped but warm against her. She leaned against him and felt his arm snake around her waist. Joyce cast her eyes back over to the kids and watched as they tried to perfect El's marshmallow toasting ability.

She couldn't believe that they actually got to this point.

She never thought she would trust again. Not after Lonnie. He had broken her faith in relationships and she knew that she would never be able to trust anyone but herself. Then she met Bob and their relationship was built on half truths, Joyce desperately trying to protect him from the whole Upside Down fiasco that had been thrust upon her life. She could never trust him with all of herself, and she had been prepared to live with that.

But then everything happened, and half-truths weren't an option anymore. She was back to fighting on her own and she wasn't sure how she would be able to collect up the pieces that her life and been torn into.

Hopper was there,, though.

He was there to help her pick up the pieces, and he was showing her just how wrong she had been. She could trust him. She could trust him with her secrets, with her children, with all of their lives. She wasn't sure why she had pushed him away for so long, but she knew that she was forever grateful for his tenacity. No matter how many times she pulled away, he was there waiting for her when she got back.

She glanced up at him and smiled.

The colorful lights reflected off his skin and there was a youthful glow about him. She realized how different he was than the boy she once knew. While he looked very much the same, just a little bigger and little hairier, he wasn't the same Jimmy Hopper from their youth. He was hardly the same Jim Hopper she had cried to for help when Will went missing. He seemed indifferent to the world, just living each day as if he didn't care about a tomorrow. Now, he was serious about her, serious about their family. He took responsibility and he was the man she had always thought he would be.

"What?" Hopper felt her eyes on him and gave her a confused grin.

"Nothing," her smile widened and she simply shrugged. "I'm just really happy."

"Yeah?" He gave her waist a small squeeze.

"Yeah," she stood on her tip toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Hopper gazed down at her and she saw his eyes dart down to her lips. She let out a laugh and closed her eyes as she saw him start to lean down. Before she felt his mouth on hers, the voice of her son broke them apart.

"Hey, Mom!" Will called over to them. "El finally did it! Look!"

Joyce nodded and smiled at the two of them. She felt Hopper's hand leaving her waist and coming to hold her hand. "Good job, sweetie! Perfecting the marshmallow for a s'more is very important."

"I'll make you both one now," Eleven said, grabbing two more marshmallows from the bag.

"Don't worry about perfecting mine. I'm not picky." Hopper told her.

Eleven gave him a bewildered look.

"Yuck," Will made a face. "You're just like Jonathan."

"Oh, here we go again..." he rolled his eyes dramatically.

Joyce laughed at their antics, watching as her family spent their Christmas Eve filling the air with an overflowing joy.

17. Chapter 17

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan isn't stupid. He knows Hopper and his mom are together, and he certainly has an opinion.

Jonathan sat on the porch, his feet sprawled out as he leaned back in the chair. He took a swig of the can of Coke in his hand and then set it down on the floor. He stared out to the yard and let out a sigh. It had been an incredibly long day and he needed space. He loved that everyone was moving on and having a good time, and he also had an alright time at the the little get together they had, but he just wasn't a person built for all that heavy socialization. He was an introvert at heart and he needed time to decompress.

He closed his eyes and brought his hand up to his face. He could feel the severity of his calloused hands against the smooth face he had recently shaved. He never had much facial hair, just enough stubble in awkward places to be annoying. Still, he always forgot how hard and rough his hands felt and he wondered how Nancy could like that. Her hands were always so soft. Everything about her was soft. The feeling her lips had been especially soft tonight and it pained him that he wouldn't be spending the rest of his night with her.

Everyone had gone home. Nancy had left with Mike in tow, muttering her annoyance about their mother wanting them home at a decent time. Dustin and Lucas had their bikes, a protesting Erica trailing behind them, shouting something sassy that he barely payed attention to. Steve and Robin were the last to leave, the two of them leaving in a fit of laughter off to whatever silly adventure Hawkin's held in store for them.

The only people still there were Hopper and El, and Jonathan didn't think the Chief of Police and his daughter were leaving anytime soon.

He wasn't naive, and the two of them weren't exactly being overly discrete. He didn't think Will or Eleven or any of the other kids had caught one. He was actually fairly certain that he was the only one

that knew that his mother and Hopper were an item. He was observant to a fault, and it wasn't too hard to believe when he thought about it.

They were drawn to each other, but they were both broken. He couldn't see it ending well. He knew about Hopper's reputation, and his mom seemed to have knack of picking men who weren't the most reliable.

Jonathan opened his eyes to look at Hopper's car that sat parked in the grass when he heard the sound of the door opening. He flicked his eyes over, ready to tell off whoever it was that he just wanted to be alone. He looked up to see Hopper there, bringing a cigarette up his lips and shutting the door behind him.

"You planning to leave anytime soon?" the words came out bitter and Jonathan wasn't quite sure why he was choosing now to snap at him. He mostly liked the Chief, and his mom did seem happy. Still, he couldn't help the sour expression that scrunched up his face and the irritation that came along with it.

Hopper didn't seem phased. He took several steps over to the other chair and unceremoniously plopped down. He took a long drag of his cigarette and looked over at the teenager. "You've been giving me this death glare all night, so let's not beat around the bush. I know you know, and all you need to know is that I care about your mother, and I'm not going to hurt her."

"Yeah? I've heard that before," he muttered. "Sorry if I don't believe that."

"I'm not a complete piece of shit," Hopper gave him a look.

"Heard that one, too." he glared over at him. "Look, whatever happens between you and my mom isn't really my business."

"You're bothered by it." Hopper said simply. "Let's just lay it all out. You can say whatever you want, treat me however you want, but I'm here to stay. You want to hate me? I can handle that. But I care so much about Joyce, and I'm not leaving unless she tells me to."

Jonathan swallowed and crossed his arms. "I don't hate you. I just- this is hard for me. I didn't like Bob, but she needed that."

"Yeah, she did." his admission was stiff and the cigarette was suddenly back in his mouth.

"But you? You don't seem like the kind of guy ready for commitment, and my mom isn't some woman you can fuck and then walk away from when you're done."

Jonathan swore he saw a flash of hurt creep on Hopper's face, the sheer openness taking him by surprise, but as soon as it appeared, it was gone. That snippet of hurt was replaced by a gruff, arguably pissed off face.

"I'm not fucking around with your mom," he said lowly. "It's...It's serious, okay?"

"If it's so serious, why are you two sneaking around like teenagers?" Jonathan rolled his eyes, pushing himself to stand up. He seriously didn't want to be having this conversation. He was angry with himself for initiating it.

"I don't know," the seriousness of his tone was eerie. "I don't care who knows. Actually, no. I do care who knows. I want *everyone* to know. I want everyone to know that I'm with her. I'm proud to be with your mom. I want people to know that if they want to spread shit or give your mom a hard time, they'll have me to deal with."

"I think people know that already," Jonathan granted, but he found his guard dropping and his resolve softening. "I don't hate you, Hopper. I just don't trust easy...but if you say you care about her, I can try."

"I love her," Hopper admitted.

Jonathan watched him, taken off guard that the Chief would admit something so honest to him. He knew the man probably hadn't said those words to his mother yet. The sincerity was startling. Something about the way he was looking up at Jonathan made something shift. Instead of feeling the anger he felt merely seconds ago, he

felt...relief? Maybe Hopper wasn't just here to hurt his mom. Maybe Hopper cared about her. Maybe he loved her...

"Okay," Jonathan said simply.

Hopper stayed silent, the cigarette coming back to his lips. His eyes traveled out to look into the yard and Jonathan could tell that was all he was willing to say on the matter, and oddly enough, that admission was enough for him. He wasn't sure why, but something deep inside told him that he should give Hopper a chance.

Maybe this time, things could be different.

18. Chapter 18

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce has a nightmare

Hopper is sleeping. He is underneath the covers, keeping warm while a heavy snow falls outside. The kids have gone to bed. There is no hustling and bustling around from room to room. There are no arguments about their weird fictional character games. There are no television noises faintly in the background. The house is completely quiet, save for Hopper's light snoring.

That's why the sound of her whimper filling the air is so startling.

Hopper sits up in the bed, quickly looking around. His hand travels to the desk and he flips on the lamp. He looks over to see Joyce laying there next to him, her face scrunched up as if she is in immense pain.

He recognizes immediately what was happening.

This wasn't the first time Joyce had a nightmare, and he knew it certainly wouldn't be her last.

"Joyce," he whispers, his hand coming down to shake her shoulder softly. "Hey, baby, wake up."

He shifts closer to her, feeling how clammy she is. She continues to let out soft cries, her body writhing. Her forehead is sweating and Hopper could easily recognize that this is a bad one. A *really* bad one.

Sometimes Joyce would wake up before he would ever hear her. She would sneak off to the bathroom and collect herself and he might never know. Most of the time he could hear her get into the shower and he would pretend to sleep until he knew she was okay. She liked to be independent and didn't want to seem like a burden, as if he could ever think of her as one. Other times, like tonight, he would hear her cries first, and he had to wake her up. Usually she woke up

right away. But on some nights... it was almost like she was trapped.

“Joy, hey, shh,” he says, his hand coming up to push her bangs back, wiping away at the sweat. “It’s just a dream. I’m right here.”

She cries out again, and all Hopper can do is watch and pretend like the sight doesn’t make him feel like his heart is being ripped out of his chest.

“Joyce,” he tries again, desperation clearly in his voice. “Joyce!”

She’s fighting against him, her body trying to push away from him. “*Stop*, get away!” she protests, the fear in her voice raw and chilling him to the core.

“*Joyce!*” Hopper says with more force, and this seems to finally get through.

Her eyes snap open. They’re hazy and he can tell she’s disoriented. She’s looking up at him and he knows she hasn’t even begun to register her surroundings yet.

“I’m right here,” he tells her, his hands rubbing up and down her arm. “I got you, okay? I got you.”

He watches as her eyes finally seem to focus. She looks up at him, her mind registering that she’s awake and that he is the one that is holding her safely in his grip.

“Jim,” she breathes out.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he tells her gently.

Her lips are quivering. Her brown eyes are staring into his, with a wild wideness that frightens him. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen her like this. Before he can do anything, Joyce bursts into tears.

“Joyce!” Hopper frantically pulls her closer. “Hey, hey, it’s okay!”

She sobs against his chest, her body wracking violently against him. Hopper wraps his arms around her, trying his best to calm her down.

“Baby, shh,” he whispers. “You’re alright. Everything is alright.”

Joyce continues to cry. He isn’t sure how long he just sits there, holding the woman he cares about more than anything as she breaks down in front of him. It kills him to see her like this. Joyce has never been shy with emotions. He has seen her cry dozens of times with everything that has happened. Still, he thinks of her as one of the strongest people he knows. Seeing her cry like this knocks the breath out of him, and all he can do is sit and try to reassure her.

After what feels like an eternity, her cries turn into sniffles, and she’s become somewhat limp in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her voice shaky.

“You okay?” he looks down at her. He doesn’t remind her for the millionth time that she doesn’t need to apologize to him. He hates how often she does. Instead, he focuses on her. He needs to know how she is feeling.

Joyce looks away from him and gives a shrug.

“Joyce...” he says, tightening his hold on her ever so slightly.

“Not really,” she admits weakly.

Hopper is trying his best to keep it together. He’s never been good at handling emotions. Never been the best at offering comfort. He’s helped her through a lot of nightmares, and she’s helped him. But he doesn’t know how to help her right now. He feels like he’s out of his element tonight. He can’t remember the last time he had seen her cry this much. It pains him so much, and he’ll be damned if doesn’t make her know that he won’t let anything happen to her.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he ventures carefully.

“Are the kids in their rooms?” she asks.

“Yeah?” he realizes she’s avoiding his question, but he doesn’t push it.

“Can we go double check? I just-”

“Yes,” he says. “You don’t have to explain it.”

Hopper gets out of bed, Joyce following suit. She’s at his side in an instant, her hand finding his. She is standing close and she remains so even as he leads them down the hall to Will’s room. He opens the door and lets her step in. He waits as she looks at Will, and then once she is done, he takes her to Eleven’s room. She repeats the process of staring at their daughter like she might disappear and then she steps away, seeming somewhat satisfied that both of them are deeply asleep in their beds.

“Everyone is okay,” he reassures her, pressing a kiss to her forehead once their back in their room and he’s shut the door.

“I dreamed that Brenner was back,” she says, closing her eyes from the warmth of his lips against her skin.

Hopper didn’t say anything. He simply waits. He didn’t want to interrupt or probe anything out of her. There is a silence that followed after that, and he watches as Joyce seems to be struggling to say what she wants to.

“He took the children away,” her voice is tearful again and Hopper was quick to try and prevent it.

“You know that won’t happen. You know that I won’t *ever* that let happen.” he cups her cheek and gazes down at her.

Joyce shakes her head. “But he took you, too,” she cries this out, and the tears are falling again. “He took all of you and I couldn’t do anything. There was nothing I could do, Hopper. *Nothing* .”

“It was just a dream,” he tries to remind her. He wipes away at her tears, his thumb tracing down her face. “It wasn’t real. He isn’t back and he’s never coming back.”

“But, what if? What if something else happens?”

“It won’t,” he sounds so sure, and she flicks her eyes up to him.

She wraps her arms around him. Hopper lets her cling to him, rubbing his hand up and down her back. They stay like this for time,

her eyes staring into his. It's one of the things he loves about Joyce. Everything with her is so...intimate. She's looking up at him and he feels like she is looking into his soul, and it's in moments like this he's reminded they're meant for each other.

They're both haunted people, but they have each other, and that's enough to fight away any nightmare that comes their way, real or not.

19. Chapter 19

Summary for the Chapter:

short season 3 one shot!

“Hey, translate!” Jim thrust the small device toward the front seat of the car as they sped away from the fair.

Murray listened to the Russian man’s words as they came from the walkie-talkie. He felt Jim staring at him impatiently from the backseat. He was breathing heavy, trying to catch his breath. Murray could feel Jim’s adrenaline pumping as if it were somehow something tangible he could force him to endure. Jim’s anger was radiating intensely, as well as Joyce’s anxiety. She was trying to focus on the road but he saw her hands trembling as she held onto the steering wheel. Murray was trying to keep himself together, but Alexei was dead.

He watched as the blood pooled onto his white shirt. All he could do was watch as his new friend was drained of his life. He had only left him for a minute to go and try and find Joyce and Jim. He really thought that he had a chance in saving him.

Now, all he could do was try and stop the people who killed him. He wasn’t going to let Alexei die in vain. The voice over the walkie-talkie finished and Murray let out a sigh.

“They found them. They found the children.”

“What?” Hopper leaned forward, practically forcing himself into the front seat. “Where?”

“The mall.” Murray shot a glance at Joyce. “He said they found some kids at Starcourt Mall”

Joyce hardly acknowledged him, but the car made a loud noise and they were suddenly barreling down the road at an intense speed.

Hopper flopped back onto his seat and brought his hand up to his face as he sighed.

“Jim, are you okay?” Murray found himself asking. “What happened back there?”

“I’m fine,” he said gruffly. His eyes roamed over Murray, giving the man a once over. He then looked over to Joyce where his gaze stayed. He was staring at her so hard that if the situation were different, Murray would have rolled his eyes at the absurdity of his vigor. “Are you two okay?”

Murray shifted and looked out to the trees whipping past them, waiting to see if Joyce would answer. The silence that followed was painful. Nobody was really okay. Jim said he was fine, because, well, he was Jim. He somehow always seemed to hold himself together. He could handle high intense situations like this without falling apart in front of others. Murray wasn’t sure what Joyce was use to. He wasn’t sure how she handled stress, but she seemed to be trying to hold herself together pretty well. He could tell she was on the verge of tears and he was sure that they could all tell that she certainly wasn’t ‘okay’. But she had to be. They couldn’t afford to stop.

Murray didn’t have time to try and analyze his own emotions. He just knew that like everyone else, he had to compartmentalize and keep moving.

“I punched Larry,” Joyce said finally, breaking the thick silence that had followed.

Murray glanced over and bit his lip, trying to gauge how to react to this. He was still completely flabbergasted that Joyce did that. He found himself chuckling at her statement, thinking back to just how hard she had decked that guy. Joyce flicker her eyes over at him and gave him a faint smile.

Hopper furrowed his brow and leaned forward. “What?”

“Not only did she punch him,” he clarified. “She also kneed him where the sun don’t shine!”

Hopper opened his mouth and then shut it. He appeared taken aback, but eventually a smile began to pull at his own lips.

“You really punched that shithead?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” she breathed out, laughing a little herself.

“I still can’t believe you did that,” Murray shook his head.

“He deserved it.” she said, her eyes meeting Hopper’s in the mirror.

“He did.” Hopper smiled, and the intimacy their look held made Murray feel like he was intruding on a private moment.

He cleared his throat, trying to earn their attention. “Where did you even learn to punch like that?”

“My ex husband,” she said simply, looking away from Hopper and back onto the road.

“Oh, I, uh-” he was scrambling and he looked back to see if Jim would help him. He had a grim expression and shot Murray a death glare. “I didn’t mean to bring up something sensitive.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, giving him a soft look. “He was an asshole who deserved it, too.”

Murray could tell she genuinely meant it, but he couldn’t shake the guilt. He had given her a hard time earlier about wanting a nice man to settle down with. Jim really had warned him that he didn’t fully understand the depth of Joyce’s background, and he really should have believed him. He hadn’t been the nicest to Joyce, he quickly realized. Neither had Hopper. They’d all been on edge and had been especially short with her. He felt awful about what he said earlier, but he knew he shouldn’t bring it up.

Still, he gave her a small smile at her attempt to lighten the situation. She seemed to be good at that, he noted. She had been optimistic about them stopping all this, and he and Jim had just kept telling her off for this and that. She was an easy target for some reason, and Murray felt himself tense up. Alexei was probably the only one who hadn’t been a complete jerk to Joyce in the last day.

He needed to say something. He felt like shit after that last comment. This whole thing was just really messed up. Murray wanted

to make it up to Joyce, but he just wasn't quite sure how. He had never been the best with this kind of thing. He was good at calling others out, but processing his own feelings? He glanced back at Hopper, who just gave him a small shake of his head. He seemed to know what he was thinking, and now wasn't the time.

For now, all he could do was ride in silence and think about all that had happened and all that was yet to come.

But, maybe after all this was over, he could make it right.

Notes for the Chapter:

fyi, I have a special valentine's day chapter that I plan to post on Friday! It's already at 2.5k, so get ready for the feels (:

hope you enjoyed this!

20. Chapter 20

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy Valentine's Day! Hope you enjoy!

It was stupid. Really stupid. He had no clue why he was so nervous. His palms were sweating and he felt like a dumb kid who had no idea what he was doing. It was just Valentine's day afterall. Yeah, maybe it was his and Joyce's first Valentine's day together, and El had given him all kinds of shit all week asking him what he was going to do to surprise Joyce. And, yeah, maybe he felt a little pressure to do something good, because he knew Joyce had probably never gotten anything decent from Lonnie. But, still, why the hell was he *this* nervous?

"You're crushing them!" El yelled at him, bumping into his arm.

Hopper cursed and loosened his grip on the bouquet of roses he was holding.

"Why are you sweating so much?" she looked up at him curiously, a grin stretching across her face.

"Just knock on the door already," he grumbled down at her.

He didn't know why Eleven had gotten such a sudden interest in grand romantic gestures, but she was really eating all this up. She had been very upset when she learned that Mike was going to be out of town and she was going to be stuck doing nothing. But, the idea of learning all about Hopper and Joyce's date seemed to wash away her sorrows considerably. He sent her an annoyed glare, but couldn't help but soften a little at her excitement.

"Okay, okay," she giggled, knocking on the door of the Byers' house.

Hopper took a deep breath and found himself holding it until the door the opened. As it began to open, he exhaled and held out the flowers, only to be met with Will's wide eyes.

“Hi,” he said. There was an unmistakable smile on his face. “You got me flowers? Oh, Hop, you shouldn’t have.” his voice was high pitched as he tried to imitate his mother.

“Ha, ha,” Hopper replied dryly. Will was really opening up to him, and he was grateful for that, but he felt far too tense to play along with him tonight. “Where is your mom?”

“She’s still getting ready. She was at work longer than planned.”

“Imagine that,” Hopper said, not hiding the irritation with Melvald’s in his voice.

“You can come in,” he said, opening the door so they could enter. “I’ll let her know you’re here.”

They made their way into the living room. El plopped down on the couch as Will made his way down the hall to his mother’s room. Hopper gave El a look, which made her sit up properly so he could join her on the sofa. He faintly heard Will’s voice as he called to his mother through the door.

“What’re you going to do after dinner?” Eleven asked.

“I’ve already answered this three times, El,” he sighed. “I haven’t decided.”

“Yeah, you’re just going to see where the evening goes. But, will you tell me where you go? Promise me you’ll tell me all about it. And not just say, ‘it was good.’ I want to know about it.”

“Sure, kid,” he said. “Maybe you and Joyce can go do something this weekend and she can tell you whether or not I did a good job.”

El’s eyes brightened up. She and Joyce had grown close over these past few months. They had a handful of ‘girl’ days where Joyce took El to do things that he would never think to do. He had no doubt that she saw Joyce as a mother figure, and he was forever grateful for the number of times he had to call Joyce for parenting advice. She really had a way with the kids. He enjoyed just watching them spend time together and seeing how naturally they all fit. They really already were like a family. Hopper really just needed to do one more thing to

make it official...

“Hopefully he does a good job,” Joyce’s voice caught their attention.

Hopper stood up from the couch immediately and felt himself staring at her in complete shock. She looked fucking gorgeous. Her brown hair was curled and looked like something he’d seen on a magazine. She was wearing a pale pink blouse that dipped down in the front ever so slightly, showing enough cleavage that was utterly maddening to look at. She had on black jeans that hugged her curves and black boots that made her legs look long and tantalizing. Hopper felt like he was openly gawking at her, but he couldn’t help it.

She looked like a dream.

“Joyce,” he felt suddenly parched. “You look...You look amazing.”

She gave him smile, a hint of blush rising to her cheeks. “Thanks, so do you.”

Hopper had tried to dress up for the occasion. They both agreed nothing outrageous. Neither of them were really those types of people. Still, he put on his nicest jeans, a dark blue pair with a black belt. He was also wearing a collared long sleeved shirt. It was a light solid grey. He decided to dial it back tonight, avoiding his usual funky patterns. Over this, he wore a heavy black coat, his gloves and hat stuffed into the pocket.

He was still staring at Joyce, taking in how nice she looked. How could she make something so simple look so good? He was too busy admiring her that he completely forgot about the flowers in his hands.

“Are those for me?” she asked tentatively, giving him an amused face.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” he offered them awkwardly.

She stepped forward and took them from him. He felt her fingers brush his as she took them from him and he couldn’t help but smile at her. She brought the bouquet up to her nose and took a small sniff. Eleven scrambled up and went over, wanting to also smell them with

her.

“Do you like them?” she asked, looking up at Joyce with curious eyes.

“I love them,” she smiled, glancing over to Hopper. “Thank you.”

“It was my idea,” El added, smelling the flowers again.

Joyce let out a laugh and Hopper felt himself give a small chuckle. “I’m just going to set these down and grab my purse, and then we can go,” She casted a glance between him and children before turning and going into the kitchen.

Hopper watched as she walked away, then turning to the two teenagers. “Okay, you two. Don’t do anything stupid while we’re gone, got it? Try and go to sleep at a decent hour. El, like I said earlier, you can sleep on the couch or in Jonathan’s room. We’ll be back by midnight and if you aren’t in bed-”

“We’ll be in a lot of trouble,” Will finished for him. “I know. We will be good.”

If it had been any other two kids, he would’ve known it was a lie. But El and Will weren’t like the others. He knew he could actually trust them. They would probably just play some weird game and then go to bed on time. It was the polar opposite of how he was. Joyce, too. The two of them had been troublemakers from the start. He honestly wasn’t sure how their parents had handled them.

Joyce came back out of the kitchen, a small black purse in hand. She had thrown on her own jacket, one that would probably do little to protect her from the cold. Will and Eleven both got up to give her a hug goodbye, and then the couple were leaving the house, with one final reminder to the kids to behave. They walked out to his car, and Hopper opened her door for her. She gave him a smile and climbed into the car. Hopper went around and got into the driver’s seat,

“So, where are we going?” she asked, drumming her fingers on her leg as he began to back out of the driveway.

“Ah, ah. It’s a surprise.” he grinned at her.

Joyce pursed her lips. He slid his hand over to her seat, coming to rest on her thigh while he drove.

“I just hope you didn’t pick anywhere too fancy,” her hand fell to his, running her small fingers across his as she looked out her window.

“Stop stressing,” he squeezed her leg.

“Yeah, because I can do that,” she rolled her eyes playfully at him.

Hopper had to admit that she was getting better at managing her anxiety. The fact that she was letting him surprise her was a big step. He could tell she was getting a little jittery, and had probably been thinking about it all day, but she was trying really hard to go with the flow. That was part of the reason he hadn’t made a plan after dinner, clearly to El’s dismay. He wanted to show Joyce that they could be spontaneous and not stress about everything anymore.

The restaurant wasn’t far away, and it wasn’t long before they could see the faint sign shinning it’s advertising light through the snow that was flurrying around.

“Bella Vita?” Joyce smiled over at him as he parked the car.

The parking lot wasn’t overly crowded. There more people than usual, given the holiday, but Hopper has been keen on picking a place that wouldn’t be too overwhelming.

“That’s okay, right?” he found himself asking. He never would have asked a date something so silly before. He was usually confident and felt like knew what he was doing. He was smooth, and most definitely never this nervous. But, to be fair, he definitely hadn’t taken anyone out for Valentine’s day since Diane, and they had always gone to the same place every year as tradition. Diane was big on Valentine’s day, always pointing out exactly what she wanted and how she wanted the day to go. Joyce was more complicated. She didn’t give him any clear hints or signs. She told him that they really didn’t need to do anything, and he knew she meant it. If Diane had said that, he would have suspected it to be a test.

Joyce was low maintenance when it came to things like this, and yet,

that somehow made him more afraid to screw up. He was good at reading her- well, as good as anyone was at reading Joyce Byers- and he liked to think he had a good idea of her tastes at this point. They had been dating for several months now, and he had known her his whole life. He blamed El for building this up so much. He didn't know why he had let the girl get into his head.

"Yeah, I haven't been here in a long time," she nodded, opening up her door.

Hopper felt a wave of relief and quickly got out of the car. He walked up to the door with Joyce, moving slightly ahead of her to open the door for her. She walked inside, giving him a quiet thank you as she passed. He followed her inside, once again stepping ahead of her to walk and give his name for the reservation he set up.

The man behind the stand scribbled something down and then took them over to a table in the corner. Hopper let Joyce lead, his hand on the small of her back. Once they got to their table, they sat down and were quickly given menus. The waiter introduced himself, pouring them glasses of water and offering them their wine selection,

"You want some?" Hopper asked her.

"Sure, but nothing too expensive," she said, eyeing the menu with some disdain.

Hopper turned to the waiter and ordered them a bottle to share. He ordered one of the more expensive bottles, ignoring the look Joyce gave him. The waiter nodded at them, departing to get their wine.

"Hey, don't worry about the price," Hopper said.

"I guess since it's a holiday..." she shrugged, not seeming overly convinced.

"I don't care whether or not it's a holiday," he pointed out. "I want you to get what you want."

"Okay, Hop," she smiled at him, letting out a little laugh.

"What's so funny about that?"

“Nothing,” she continued to laugh, her nose crinkling in the most adorable way. “You’re just really cute sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” he smirked at her. He really liked it when Joyce said things like that to him. It was endearing and it actually made him feel good about himself. It was so sincere, and she had a way about making others feel special.

“Hmmm,” she hummed. “More often than not.”

“Well, I think you’re cute all the time,” he said. “But, please, baby, don’t worry about the price. This night is about us.”

She let out a little sigh but nodded.

The waiter returned with their wine, pouring them both a generous glass before asking them if they are ready to order. Joyce quickly looked over the menu again and nods, ordering a pasta dish that isn’t expensive, but isn’t exactly cheap either. He knows she would never order it on her own, and he’s glad that she’s feeling more comfortable with him spending money on her. They had this same argument many times. On their second date, she had insisted on paying for their meal herself. She was endlessly stubborn and independent. She was finally starting to realize that she didn’t have to face everything on her own. That she could trust him and that they could be a team. A real team.

Hopper orders his food, and the waiter is scurrying off again to take their order to the kitchen. Hopper brings the glass of wine to his lips and takes a sip, then watching as Joyce does the same. It’s a deep red wine, typically her wine of choice. Her eyes close briefly and she seems satisfied with his choice.

“This is really nice,” she commented.

“A little dry,” he made a face, not quite sure how she can enjoy it so much, but still glad she does nonetheless.

“You better help me out,” she glanced at the bottle. “I’m not drinking a whole bottle myself.

Hopper laughed, agreeing that he would help.

It wasn't long before their food was brought out, and Hopper had to admit that he was feeling really hungry.

"Do you remember that time in Mrs. Watson's class?" Joyce laughed, looking at their food. "When she had us make that spaghetti dish and-

"And we were terrible cooking partners," he smiled at the memory.

Home economics had been his least favorite class at first. It wasn't a class for guys like him, but of course he had been required to take it. He figured he was the worst cook in the school, but then when he partnered up with Joyce, he realized that his childhood friend was somehow worse than him. That quickly made it one of his favorite classes.

"She was so mad," Joyce forked at her food, still laughing. "She had shown us the directions so many times and we still managed to mess it up."

Hopper chuckled, and they were soon engaged in conversation, reminiscing about the past. It felt surreal to think back on these events and think of how vastly different everything had seemed then. Eventually, they began talking about their children. That seemed to be what they always found themselves talking about. Those kids were their lives, to be fair. He never thought he would be this involved in a child's life again after Sara, and sometimes it was a little strange when he sat back and really thought about where he was.

"I just really thought their infatuation with each other would have died out by now," he admitted, filling up her glass with the remainder of the bottle. Despite her prior complaint, Joyce was in fact drinking most of the wine. He could tell she was feeling a little buzzed, because her face was a little flushed and she seemed to find everything he was saying either entirely too funny or way more exciting than it actually was.

"Hop, remember what it was like to be young and in love," she takes a sip, glancing briefly at the waiter as he begins to take up their plates.

"I was never in a relationship this long," he argued. "I was after a new girl every couple of months."

"Yeah, but Mike is way nicer than you," she giggled

The waiter places the check down in front of Hopper and lingers as he pulls out his wallet.

"You're biased," he said. "That kid could do anything and you'd still think the world of him."

"He's a good kid," she argued. "I think you just think everyone is like you. And we both know how negative you can be about yourself, Hop"

"Yeah, and you see the good in everyone," he pointed out. "Even when you shouldn't."

Joyce doesn't comment on this, finishing her glass of wine. "I think your plan was to try and get me tipsy," she whined, standing up and fumbling with her jacket.

Hopper followed her motion, and shook his head. "Not my plan, but I'm not complaining."

He led them out of the restaurant and the pair see that the snow has begun to fall much heavier than before. Hopper slips on his gloves and glances over to see Joyce doing the same. She still has a smile on her face and it makes him feel content with how their evening has good. They made their way to the car and once he's let her inside and made his way back over to the passenger side, he feels her looking at him expectantly.

"What now?" she asked, rubbing her hands together.

"Anything you want," he told her.

"Oh," she breathed out.

"Is that okay?" an apology is already forming on his lips. El was right, he should have planned something. The look on Joyce's face was throwing him off and he feels like he's messed up.

“Yeah,” she said, completely surprising him. “I’ve been wanting to give you your gift all night, so I guess I could give that to you?”

“Sure,” he said, relief flooding through him. “You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“It’s not anything too special,” she shrugged. “But, it’s actually at your house.”

“Wait. Really? How did you manage that?” he wondered if El had helped her out somehow.

“I’m not going to tell you,” she shook her head, giggling again.

Hopper grinned and began the drive to his place. Perhaps it was the anticipation of this mystery gift, or Joyce’s excitement at giving him this ‘gift’, but the drive to his place seemed to take forever. The snow was picking up considerably. He was glad to see the familiar road that lead to his house and it wasn’t long before he was unlocking the door to his house, letting them both inside.

“It’s in your room,” she smiled up sweetly at him, tugging at his arm.

Hopper couldn’t help but notice the mischievous glint in her eyes as he followed her. She immediately pushed him on the bed, her fingers ghosting over his shoulders in a way that sent a chill down his spine.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered.

Hopper obeyed, shutting his eyes. He heard her move away, and he couldn’t help but let his smile grow. What was she doing? He heard the movement of fabric, and *oh my god* , was she taking off her clothes? Hopper fought the urge to open his eyes, fidgeting a bit.

“Joyce?” he asked, unable to handle the suspense.

“Okay, open,” she said.

Hopper opened his eyes. He felt his breath catch in his throat and all the blood rush straight to his groin.

She’s standing in front him, her beautiful brown hair thrown back

behind her, body covered up in the most jaw dropping lingerie he has ever seen. Her breasts are covered by a thin layer of black lace and even in the dim lighting he can see her nipples. The lace spans down over her stomach, and oh god, he can barely imagine how little the back covers compares to the front. She's looking at him a little bit nervously, a rosey flush coming to her cheeks.

"Do you like it?" she asked tentatively.

Hopper didn't answer. Instead, he reached out to her, pulling her closer to him. She smiles at him and comes, sitting down to straddle him. He crashes his mouth against her hungrily. Her lips are soft and his hands are everywhere. He sighs as he runs his hand against the lingerie, groaning as he feels her press into him.

"Fuck, Joyce," he stops kissing her to express his thoughts. "You look so fucking hot."

"I'm glad you like it," her breathing is heightened, and her pupils dilated.

His hands are just running up and down her body, trying to feel every inch of her. She presses her lips back to his, and he can taste the wine. It somehow tastes so much better mixed with her. His tongue flicks into her mouth, swirling around, and soon her own tongue is fighting with his. He feels her fumbling with his clothes, so he pulls away briefly to help her. He takes off his shirt, panting as he feels her lace against his chest, her full cleavage catching his attention. He's staring at her body in this and he literally can't comprehend that he has a literal goddess in front of him. The way she looks right now...

"Best gift ever," he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Were you wearing this all night?" he's thinking of her wearing this in the restaurant, how it must have been in the back of her mind the whole time while he sat there completely unsuspecting. That was honestly just so damn hot to think about.

"Yes," she sighed, sounding pleased with herself. "I'm really glad you didn't make any kind of plans after dinner. I wasn't sure how long I was going to be able to hold out."

“You really are the perfect woman,” he said.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Hop,” she whispered to him, shaking her head at him with fondness.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Guys... David's IG... HOPPER IS ALIVE!! I am so happy and I'm sure you all are as well!! Ughhhh, like words cannot even describe how awesome this is! We all suspected he was alive, but to the have the confirmation? I seriously need somebody to fangirl with.

21. Chapter 21

It's not fair.

All El wants is to go with Mike and his family on their vacation. She's never wanted anything more in her life. Mike's mom said she could go with them on their trip to visit Mike's Nana, and El was literally over the moon with excitement.

She knew Hopper would say no. That didn't surprise her at all. Her father was always wanting her to do things that didn't involve Mike, so she knew he wouldn't be happy with her going on a trip with his family. His quick dismissal of the idea was entirely expected. What completely blindsided her was how fast Joyce was to have his side. It was so frustrating.

Usually, Joyce came to her rescue. She would somehow convince Hopper that she and Mike could spend time together. However, this time, she actually agreed with Hopper, and El was beyond angry.

So, El sits in the diner booth with a sour look on her face. Her arms are crossed and she's refusing to even look at the menu. She knows it's probably childish, but couldn't they see how they were stopping her from being happy with Mike? They had officially ruined her summer.

"What time do you think Jonathan will be in?" Will asked. He was so excited that Jonathan was coming home for a few weeks on the summer break, his glee was practically suffocating to her deliberate sulking.

"Not until after dinner tonight," Joyce's eyes run over the menu.

"How many times are you going to ask that?" El grumbles at him.

Joyce gives her a look, and El lets out a sigh. Will just shrugs and acts like he doesn't hear her.. El considers apologizing, but the waitress comes over and starts passing out waters before she can.

"Hopper's running late," Will comments absently.

"He probably just got held up," Joyce says. "You can wait another few minutes."

"I'm *starving*," Will says dramatically, but smiles and nods anyways.

"El, do you already know what you want?" Joyce asks her. She's noticed that she hasn't even touched the menu.

"I'm not eating," El says shortly.

"You have to eat," Joyce tells her. She sounds so serious that it immediately irritates her further.

"I don't *have* to do anything," she snaps out.

Joyce blinks, as if she's processing what just happened. Will has quickly brought his water to his lips and is looking away.

"Actually, you do," Joyce tells her. "And you're going to lose the attitude before your dad gets here."

"Or what? You already took away my summer plans with Mike."

"El, stop," Will nudges her.

"You're ordering something," Joyce says. It's so rare that she speaks this way, and El won't lie, it's a little frightening. But, she won't back down. She's gone too far already. "This isn't a debate. You might be fifteen, but you're still the child in this relationship, and you aren't boycotting food as a way of acting out."

"You're not my mother!" El screams out.

And then, without warning, Joyce's glass of water shatters in her hand.

She lets out a gasp, the glass slicing into her skin. El's mouth falls open in shock, and Will is scrambling to his feet.

"Mom!" he's grabbing at napkins and thrusting them towards her frantically. He flashes a look to El. "What the hell?!"

"I- I'm so sorry!" El cries out, not knowing what to do. Her powers weren't like they use to be. She didn't always have as much control as she used to and she had just been so mad...

She became aware of the people in the diner looking over at them, hushed whispers filling the air. Their waitress came running over, the manager hot on her heels. Of course, this also happened to be the exact time that Hopper's car pulled up.

El was looking at Joyce with wide eyes. There was blood coming from her hand and so many of the napkins were now stained with an angry red. The sight makes her feel sick and she feels like the whole room is spinning.

"I didn't mean to!" she can feel tears pooling in her eyes, and she wants so desperately to reach out and help but she's terrified she'll somehow make it worse.

The door to the dinner opens, the bell overhead dinging, and El feels Hopper striding over to them.

"Joyce!" his voice is always so loud and commanding. He's to them in a moment, taking Will's place. His hand is pressing the napkins against her hand and his eyes are roaming everywhere to try and make sense of what happened.

El can tell that Joyce is becoming overwhelmed with all the attention.

"It's okay," she says, first looking at Hopper. They hold each other's gaze for a long moment and then Joyce is looking over at El. "I'm okay, sweetie."

El can't help but to cry. She feels Hopper looking at her, and she knows he is piecing together what happened. She has no idea what it looks like to the outside world.

"Mom, you're bleeding so much," Will sounds unsure. "Are you sure you don't need stitches?"

She nods at him. "It's okay, really." She is then quickly apologizing to the staff, blaming herself for what happened. She just hadn't been

paying attention and the glass slipped and just happened to cut her just right. This lie just makes El cry harder.

They are then leaving the diner, and it's all just a blur through her thick tears. El follows them into the parking lot, sniffing as she tries to regain herself. As soon as they get to their cars, Hopper is speaking lowly to Joyce.

She is shaking her head and looking up at him with reassurance. Will is lingering near them, his hand on the car door. He hates driving. He has been pushing it off and avoiding it at all costs, much to everyone's dismay. But, he is clearly planning to drive Joyce back to the house. He looks over at El and simply shakes his head before climbing into the car.

El stands there idly as she watches Hopper press a kiss to Joyce's head and she climbs into the car. He motions for El to get into his car and she does so silently.

"What the fuck happened?" he asks, looking at her as soon as she shuts the door.

"It's my fault," El says. "But I didn't mean to, I swear!"

"I know," he says lowly. "And so does Joyce. We both know that. But you could've really hurt her, El. You have to be more careful."

"I didn't even know what I was doing! It's not like before!"

"Yeah," he sighs. "I know you're mad about the whole Mike thing, but you can't keep lashing out when you don't get your way. It's getting real old, and this time someone got hurt."

"I'm sorry," she whispers. She waits a moment, the silence heavy before she whispers, "Are you mad at me?"

"I'm mad at the situation," he says, staring out the window before glancing at her. "I'm mad that you did this, but I'm more mad at myself."

"What do you mean?" she asks, not understanding. How could he possibly be mad at himself? This whole thing was her fault. She had

been so caught up in her feelings and her anger that she let it take over. It was frightening how much power she had based on just simplistic emotions.

“This isn’t your fault,” he says. El is about to protest when he continues on. “Yes, you shattered the glass, but I need to help you figure out some way to make all this better. You shouldn’t have to feel so...so out of control.”

“I would never hurt Joyce,” she says, her lip wobbling. “I don’t know what’s going on with me. I don’t want anyone to be mad at me. I don’t want to hurt people when I’m mad.”

“We’re going to work on it,” he promises her. “And just because I’m upset with you doesn’t mean I don’t love you, El.”

She nodded slowly, still fighting back more tears. After so many years with Papa, she was still surprised when Hopper reminded her of what it was like to be loved unconditionally. Still, she felt absolutely awful about what happened. She he wasn’t sure how she was going to fix herself or make it up to Joyce, but she felt a small comfort in knowing she wouldn’t have to do it alone.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm considering doing a follow up chapter of Joyce and Hopper talking about how to help El.... lmk what you think!

22. Chapter 22

Notes for the Chapter:

Continuation of the previous chapter!

The sky was dark, few stars lighting up the sky. Joyce was content with Jonathan home, the faint sound of familiar music coming from his room down the hall. Will was hanging out with his big brother, so unbelievably excited to see him that it made her heart melt. Jonathan going to college had been hard for her, but even harder for Will. She loved their bond, and seeing them together almost made her forget the chaotic event earlier that day.

El had gone to bed early, clearly still shaken from everything. Joyce wasn't sure what she and Hopper had talked about on their ride home, but El had probably cried and apologized to Joyce for over an hour when they came through the front door. Joyce had even more trouble convincing Hopper that it was okay for him to go back to work, his lunch break having clearly taken way more than his allotted time.

It had been a long day, and Joyce had done quite well at continuing on as if her hand wasn't practically throbbing with pain at random times. She had wrapped it up with some bandages she kept in the back of the medicine cabinet. The bleeding had stopped in the car ride home, and she knew it wasn't serious. But, it still hurt like a bitch, and she couldn't deny that it was still bothering her considerably.

She didn't like the way Jonathan had looked at her hand when he came through the front door himself that evening, his dark eyes immediately seeing her hand and burning with a hatred he saved specifically for Lonnie. She took him aside, explaining the situation quietly. El had finally calmed down, and she didn't want to get all that started again. Between Jonathan and Hopper randomly staring at her hand all night, she really felt like she was having to put on one of her best performances that everything was fine. Will and El seemed to buy it, and that was frankly enough for her. She hated to see El so upset, even if she was the source of her pain, and she didn't want to

stress out Will anymore than usual. His anxiety was getting to be about as bad as hers.

She was in the kitchen cleaning up, vaguely listening to Hopper's silly television show, when her hand began to throb to the point she knew she needed to go and check on it. She sneaked out of the kitchen and into their bedroom. She quietly went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. She slowly unwrapped the bandage. She winced as the pressure released and looked down at her hand. She let out an exhale, looking at the cut in the bathroom lighting.

Joyce cringed as she thought of trying to go to work tomorrow with her hand in this shape. The cut was a clean slice, not overly deep, but enough so that she couldn't imagine having to try and pick anything up. It simply burned more than anything. She figured that she needed to leave it unwrapped for the night, and sighed as she thought of bumping it into something unintentionally.

She was thinking about where she had last seen something to clean it with when she heard the door to the bedroom open and close. She watched as the door to the bathroom was attempted to be open, the lock jiggling.

"Joyce?" Hopper said. She could tell he was trying to act casual, but he was very bad at hiding it. The worry in his tone was blatantly obvious. "You alright?"

"Yeah," she called back, realizing how fake her own voice sounded to her ears.

She was met with a silence and she closed her eyes, waiting to see what he would do. She heard him give a sigh and try the handle again.

"You wanna let me in?" he sounded tired.

"Not really," she admitted, keeping her eyes closed.

"Joyce..." he said. "*Please*."

She wordlessly unlocked the door, knowing that he would stand there all night until she came out. He rarely said please, and she figured

him checking on her would help ease his mind. He really liked to be in control, show all of them that he could handle everything and protect them, and today was proof once again that he could never have complete control. She knew he was hurting from this, and her clumsy attempts at covering for El at the diner didn't help. She felt like everyone was looking at her the same way they did when she was with Lonnie, like she was this crazy and fragile person on the brink of snapping, and she knew Hopper hadn't missed the judgmental stares.

He stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. His eyes immediately shot to her hand and he cursed.

"Fuck," he said. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Joyce scowled at him. "What? Are you serious?"

"It looks awful," he reached out for her hand and she lifted it towards him so he could examine it, despite how she wasn't appreciating his tone. "Why were you acting like it was fine all day? I could tell something was up. Shit. Shit, Joyce, I asked you so many times if you were okay and you said yes and...dammit, I knew you were lying."

"Do you really need me to explain that to you?" she snatched her hand back, wincing a bit as she did so. "You know El already felt bad enough. She didn't need to hear me complaining every ten minutes and feel worse."

"How bad does it hurt?"

"Comes and goes," she said honestly. "It's fine."

"Jonathan told me-" Hopper started when she cut him off, already knowing where this going and feeling a flash of anger rise in her.

"You and Jonathan should really just drop it," she said. "You've both been acting like those people at the restaurant. Looking at me like I'm about to break all day, and I told you that I'm fine. It's just a cut. It's sore, but that's all. I'm telling you that it's okay, so *drop it*."

"Jonathan told me," he repeated, his voice growing a bit louder. "That you had a cut from Lonnie and you kept saying it was fine, and

it really wasn't all that fine, was it?"

"He shouldn't have told you that," she glared at him, leaning against the bathroom counter.

"Why not?" he challenged her. "You didn't tell me that he cut-"

"Oh, I'm so sorry that I don't bring up every time my ex beat me up," she snapped, her sarcasm making his jaw clench. "You want a list? Would that make you happy? I know how to take care of myself, and I don't need you or Jonathan treating me like I don't know what I'm doing! I know what I'm doing!"

Hopper stared at her, and she felt her heart rate accelerating as her anger rose. She stood there for a moment, waiting for him to say something. He eventually let out a sigh and brought his hand up to rub his face.

"I didn't come in here to fight with you," he said, looking over at her with apologetic eyes. "I just feel so...I want to know you're okay. Actually okay."

Joyce felt her features soften and she bit her lip. She wasn't sure why, but she felt her eyes starting to tear up. She tried to blink away at them furiously, crossing her arms as she shrugged at him. "It hurts, but I'm really okay. It's not nearly as bad as..." she stopped herself, not really wanting to think back on painful memories. "I'm okay, Hop."

He nodded. Joyce looked at the stress still visible on his face. She sank down to the ground, leaning against the wall and looked up at him expectantly. He closed his eyes briefly, then walked to the wall across from her, sliding down so that he was also on the ground.

"She'll be okay, too," Joyce said. The tile was cold, and she kept her hand in her lap. She looked at him, trying her hardest to make him believe those words.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said. "Owens and all those new quacks, they've hit a wall with her, and she's been lashing out so much recently."

"Things will get worse before they get better," she said, remembering how Owens had told her those exact words regarding Will.

Hopper shook his head at that. "I know. I'm just--"

"Ready for it be over," she finished for him.

He gave her a sad smile. "What are we going to do? She can't just- I mean she hurt you today. What happens if next time it's worse?"

"We'll do our best," she told him. "We've made it this far. This is just another thing we'll tackle."

"But what if it's not enough?"

"It will be," she said. "Hop, you know we got this. If anybody could do it, it's us."

"I wish for once it didn't have to be. For once, we could just be...normal."

"Yeah," she agreed, looking at him with a sad smile.

Joyce wasn't sure how long they stayed sitting on their bathroom floor, Hopper's frenzied thoughts practically leaking out of his head. She let him try to get rid of his guilt that he certainly shouldn't have had about this. She gave comfort, but things were...complicated. However, she would be damned if she didn't spend her time reassuring him, even if he had been a little bit of an ass about it all. He had been there for her every step of the way with Will, and she wanted Hopper to know that he didn't have to face this alone.

He never would have to face any of it alone again.

After some time, there was a light knock on the door, and Joyce's tired eyes followed Hopper's figure as he stood up and went to open it.

"Hey, what are you still doing up?" he asked. "It's late."

"Can I talk to Joyce?" El asked, her voice hoarse. It was obvious she had been crying again.

Hopper cast a glance back at Joyce, who was standing up from her spot on the floor.

"It's important," El added nervously.

"Yeah. I'll just be in bedroom," he said.

Joyce watched as he let El in. He shut the door behind him as he stepped into the room, trying to give them some privacy.

"Is everything okay?" Joyce asked as the girl stood there awkwardly, her arms crossed.

"I was just thinking about earlier, and I wanted to say I'm sorry," she said.

"Oh, El, you already apologized, and I know it was an accident," Joyce told her sincerely.

"No, not for that. I'm sorry for that but," her eyes started to feel with tears. "I didn't mean to say it."

"Say what?" Joyce asked.

"That you weren't my mom!" El cried.

Joyce immediately took her in her arms. "Oh, sweetie, shhh. It's okay. I know you didn't mean it."

"But it was wrong and I shouldn't have said it," she hiccuped. "You are my mom, Joyce. You really are."

Joyce hugged her a little tighter, ignoring the flash of pain from her hand. "I love you, El. I love you just like I love Will and Jonathan. I'll always be here to help you, okay?"

"I love you, too," El said. "I'm sorry that I have to make everything so hard."

"El, look at me," Joyce said, staring at the girl until she did so. "Nothing is ever easy. I'm so glad that you are my daughter. You mean the world to me. You mean the world to your dad."

El's eyes filled with more tears, but a small smile formed on her face. "I'm glad you're my mom. And I know you mean the world to me and dad, too. Jonathan even said you had Hopper wrapped around your finger."

Joyce chuckled at this. "Jonathan has been home for a few hours and has been quite the gossip. I don't know what's gotten into him."

El laughed through her tears, nodding her head. "Will said he blames college."

Their joined laughter must have been the sign Hopper needed to come back and remind El that it was well past time for her to be in bed. She nodded, giving Joyce another quick hug.

Today had been a bit of a whirlwind, but at the end of the day, Joyce was content as she watched El say goodnight to Hopper. Things were uncertain, and her hand was hurt, however, she knew they would get through this. She really meant what she said to Hopper.

The journey might be hard and full of trouble, but if anybody could do it, it was them.

23. Chapter 23

Summary for the Chapter:

Post season two sexual tension. Maybe a scene where they talk about Bob. -joppersolo1138

It was Lucas' birthday, and his family had thrown a party for their son that had drawn quite the crowd. While most of the parents dropped their kids off, Joyce couldn't bring herself to leave Will. It had been five months since...*everything*. She wanted to give him space, but her paranoia was simply too intense to allow her to leave him alone for too long. She had originally hoped Jonathan could take his brother and it would seem more 'cool,' but he had already made other plans with Nancy.

Luckily, Joyce wasn't the only parent who seemed unable to stray too far from their kid. Hopper had been keeping a watchful eye on El, which hadn't gone unnoticed by everyone. People had a lot of questions, but Hopper did a good job at making the subject seem unapproachable. Joyce could tell that their kids were getting irritated with them hanging around, so she decided to go and wait outside to pass the time.

The temperature outside was comfortable, and Joyce leaned against the wall of the Sinclair's house, taking out a cigarette and putting it between her lips. She lit it quickly and exhaled as the smell of smoke filled the air. A smile tugged at her lips as she heard the door open, the Chief of Police stepping out with a small scowl on his face to join her.

"This party isn't anything like I expected," he said, fishing out his own pack of cigarettes.

"What were you expecting?" she asked.

"Nothing this..." he gestured his hand around in the air as he tried to think of the right word. "Nerdy?"

Joyce let out a laugh and shook her head at him. "Ill take nerdy over

how we were any day.”

“Hmm,” Hopper chuckled. “That’s true. I can’t really imagine either of us having a birthday party like this when we were their age. I don’t even know half of the things they’re talking about. I don’t know El can keep up with it.”

“I’m pretty sure you were already smoking when you were that age,” Joyce teased, watching as he lit his own cigarette and began to smoke.

“Yeah,” he nodded, thinking back to his childhood. “It’s funny. I got in so much trouble from my old man, and the only reason I started smoking was to impress a girl.”

Joyce gave him a look. “That’s the only reason?” she quirked a brow at him.

“Well, it was a *big* reason,” he shrugged, smirking. “But you’ve got to understand, this girl was really something else.”

Joyce laughed and rolled her eyes. “Did it work?”

She was smiling at him, and she barely noticed as his eyes sought a glimpse at her lips.

“It did,” he said. “But it wasn’t easy. I had to memorize her schedule and wait around for weeks, just hoping that one day she would notice me. I would stand outside her classes and smoke, and then one day she finally approached me. She asked me for a cigarette, and when I pulled out my pack, she quickly said-”

“Never mind,” she laughed again, remembering exactly how mortified she had been that day to see what brand he smoked. “You had those awful cigarettes with no filter.”

“Still do,” he grinned at her. “You broke my heart that day.”

Joyce looked up at him. “Oh, please.”

“But it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” he bumped her playfully.

“And then something more,” she said, and the flirtatious tone of her voice surprised her.

Hopper blinked, clearly thrown off by it as well. He recovered quickly, however, and he was smugly smiling at her. He wasn’t being discrete anymore, openly glancing down to check out her lips. “Yeah, and then something more.”

Joyce bit her lip, and she felt the distance between them disappearing. Her own eyes met his lips, and holy shit, were they were going to kiss? She could still remember what he tasted like. She thought of it often. His lips had always been consuming. He had made her feel like she was on fire. Would his kisses still make her feel that way? Would her kiss make him feel that way?

She really hadn’t kissed anybody since...Bob.

The thought brought her crashing back to reality and she immediately cringed.

“Bob would’ve had a birthday party like this,” she said, suddenly stepping away and breaking the spell they had both fallen under.

Hopper stiffened, stepping away from her as well. “Oh, um, yeah. He probably would’ve.” He was trying to hide his shock and disappointment, and she felt guilty. “He liked stuff like this. He probably would’ve been playing that weird game the kids are always trying to explain to us.”

“I really wanted that for Will,” she said, looking away from him. “He needed someone like that.”

“What about what you want?” he asked her, and his voice soft. She swallowed as she felt him staring at her. “What do you need, Joyce?”

You.

She wanted to say it, but she couldn’t.

She wasn’t ready. It was too soon. What kind of person would she be if she just moved on that quickly? Bob had literally died for her and her family, and here she was thinking about how badly she wanted

Hopper to slam her against the wall and kiss her like there was no tomorrow.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, and she felt tears pooling in her eyes.

She felt Hopper put his arm around her, his cigarette thrown carelessly and scuffed out on the ground, and she closed her eyes as he held her.

I’m sorry,” he said, his lips so close to her hairline that it sent shivers through her body.

“Me, too,” she said.

I’m sorry that I’m not ready and I hope you’ll wait for me.

She didn’t say these words, but somehow, she felt like Hopper had heard them.

At least, she hoped he did.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope brings you a small bit of joy in this time of panic. Stay safe out there!

24. Chapter 24

Summary for the Chapter:

The children are all at the Wheelers. Joyce goes to Hop's with a bottle of wine to spend an evening as . But Hop has a hot date that night...Date goes wrong, Hop goes to see Joyce and they talk...or do more than that? -hopbyers98

Hopper was dabbing on the last bit of his cologne when he heard a knock at his front door. He checked his hair one last time, grinning at his stellar appearance as he made his way to see who it was. El and all the other kids were over at the Wheeler's that night, hellbent on watching some new scary movie together, so he knew it couldn't be any of them showing up at his doorstep unannounced. He couldn't count how many times the little redhead girl had shown up without calling, and he hoped that there hadn't been any miscommunications about where to go and one of them was here by accident.

He had a date to pick up, and he certainly couldn't be late.

Hopper opened the door and felt his blood run cold as he was met with the sight of Joyce. She smiled up at him, her brown eyes shinning with excitement. He glanced down and saw in her hands that she had a bottle of Merlot. Her outfit was casual, but the thing about Joyce was she made even the most basic outfits look attractive. Her eyes were scanning over him, and the smile she had started to fade as the realization fell upon her.

"You're all dressed up," she commented.

"Yeah, uh, I got a date tonight," he said, leaning against the door frame.

She bit her lip. "Oh, I- um. I should've called first. I just- I assumed... I thought since the kids were over at Karen's we could hang out, but a date? Um, a date..."

"Joyce, I'm-" he started to say. He felt like he owed her some kind of

explanation. Some kind of apology. As if she wasn't the one who had been turning him down for weeks. He hadn't been expecting this, and shit, he probably shouldn't have told her that he had a date with someone else tonight.

"Here," she held out the bottle to him, and by reflex, he took it. "You can have this. It's not much, but I'm sure she'll appreciate it."

"Joyce, wait," he said, trying to give her the bottle back. "It's not- It's not anything serious."

"Still, it should be fun," she gave him an encouraging smile, and that felt like a knife to his heart. "If you need me to pick up El later because things are going good..." she trailed off, making a face as she fully comprehend what she was insinuating. "Um, let me know."

She cleared her throat and was turning away from him, headed back out to her car. All he could do was watch in a state of shock. He stayed on the porch and watched as she climbed into her green pinto and drove away. The bottle of wine felt oddly heavy in his hand, and he tried to shake away what just happened as he made his way to his own car. The confidence he had been feeling only moments earlier had been replaced by uncertainty and longing for something that could never be.

He blasted the radio as he made his way to pick up his date, and he mentally scolded himself for his conflicting thoughts.

Stop feeling guilty. Joyce doesn't want to go out with me. I've been dropping hints for months and she hasn't taken the bait. She's not ready and I can't be an asshole and force her into something.

But, then why did she show up to spend her time with me? She had a bottle of wine and there was that one time she was definitely flirting. And that other time she was totally flirting again. Not to mention those long looks we've been sharing... I can see that she's trying but it's like every time we take one step forward we take two steps back.

The look in her eyes when I said I had a date...

"Jim!" the muffled voice of his date from outside his car caught his

attention. "You going to unlock the door?"

Hopper cursed. He hadn't realized he had pulled up and stopped in her yard. He had been too lost in his own thoughts. He quickly unlocked the door and gave her a smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Long day at the office."

"That's okay," Laura flashed him her own smile as she climbed in.

Her scent filled the car and Hopper gave her a once over. She certainly was pretty. Blonde hair and blue eyes. She was wearing a tight purple shirt that showed an abundance off cleavage, a silver necklace falling down to draw more attention to her chest.

I can do this.

Just don't think about Joyce.

Hopper gave Laura a compliment, earning a fit of giggles and a classic touch to his shoulder, and he forced a grin as he began the drive to the restaurant.

The conversation was easy with her, and for a moment, he thought maybe he was actually doing it. He thought maybe he was finally back into the dating life. But about halfway through his dinner, he realized he couldn't keep pretending. Laura was simple and agreeable, and in the past it would have been enough for him, but it was really all just falling flat. She was a little boring and a lot like most other women he had gone out with. She was willing to be whatever he wanted her to be for the night.

In the end, it really wasn't her fault. His date was exactly what he thought he needed to remind him that there were a lot of fish in the sea. And, yeah, Laura did remind him this, but it didn't matter. There was a whole sea out there, and yet he only wanted one specific one, even if she was impossible to catch.

He paid for their dinner, and continued on like it was all fine and dandy. He didn't think Laura seemed to notice his sudden change, making up for his silence with laughter and more detailed stories. She seemed to be enjoying herself all while he was wondering why

he ever thought this was a good idea to begin with.

He really thought he could just go out and forget all the feelings that had been growing inside him for months...

He was an idiot.

"You should come inside," Laura told him as the night was coming to an end and he parked the car outside her house.

"Thanks, but I have some paperwork I need to do from today." he gave an excuse, finding it hard to meet her eyes. She really was nice, and he felt a little bad that he couldn't tell her the truth. But, really, what could he say that didn't make him sound like a complete dick?

"It can't wait?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Sorry."

"Oh," she seemed a bit stunned, and she tried to recover gracefully. "Well, I guess call me? I had a good time tonight with you, Jim."

He nodded, wishing her a good night as she got out of the car. He waited until she unlocked her door and safely went inside. He felt a flood of relief go through him, and he didn't spend a second longer in her yard before he was driving over to Joyce's house.

He was driving way too fast, and to be honest, he wasn't sure why he was in such a hurry. It was still early. There was no way she had already called it a night. He couldn't help but wonder what was she doing. She was probably worrying about Will. That much was a given. But was she also thinking about him? Was she thinking about him on his date? Did she care?

He was barreling down her driveway, reaching into the backseat as he fumbled blindly for her bottle of wine he had placed there earlier. He grabbed it, gathering himself out of the car. He smoothed himself down and tried to act casual as he strolled up to her door. His heart was pounding at this impulsive decision to show up at her house when he had just sent her away from his own barely two hours ago.

He knocked on the door and heard some shuffling around as she

made her way to him. She cracked open the door slowly, uncertain about who would be coming to visit her.

“Hop?” she said that nickname that made him smile. “What’re you doing here?”

He smirked at her and held up the wine. “I’m here to hang out with you.”

She gave him a look, raising her brow. She stepped aside and let him in. He noticed as she crossed her arms nervously, seemingly self-conscious about how she was in her pajamas. He wanted to tell her she looked beautiful, but he also knew she would find it embarrassing and somehow think he was teasing her instead of being sincere. So instead he settled on the couch as she went into the kitchen, fetching them both wine glasses. She came back out and handed him the wine opener and watched as he popped the cork out. He filled up their glasses and handed her one as she sat down next to him.

“I take it your date didn’t go well?” she asked, taking a sip.

“I told you it wasn’t anything serious,” he said.

“Either way, I was still expecting a phone call to go get El,” she joked.

Neither of them laughed.

He looked at her, staring at her hard as he tried to figure her out.

She likes me. She was clearly jealous of the date. It’s written all over her face.

We both need to stop being scared of happiness.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” she offered.

“You don’t sound sorry,” he said gently, watching her squirm slightly under his gaze.

“Yeah, well,” she stumbled, glancing at him. “Maybe I’m not.”

“I’m not sorry either,” he said, setting his glass down.

He felt the atmosphere shift in the room, and this was his chance. He was done pushing everything down.

Joyce took a long sip of her wine. She let out a small sigh, setting hers down as well. “Hop...I’m sorry if I ruined tonight for you. I wasn’t thinking when I came over and- I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” he said. “It was stupid.”

“Stupid?” she asked. “Was it that bad?”

“No. Laura was fine. The date was fine.”

“But?”

“But she wasn’t you, Joyce.”

“Oh,” she breathed out, staring right back at him.

“I’m tired of this,” he said, shaking his head. He moved a bit closer to her, and their legs brushed against each other.

“Tired of what?” she asked, her eyes flicking down to their skin touching.

“Tired of pretending like there isn’t something here,” he gestured between them.

He felt his heart pounding in his ears and he waited for her to react.

Joyce swallowed, giving a painfully slow nod. “Me, too.”

Fuck.

“Tell me to stop,” he said, his hands going to her legs. He moved them up her smooth skin, and her eyes closed at the feeling. “Tell me you don’t want this.”

“I do,” she whispered, and he felt an unexpected thrill rush through him.

It was finally happening.

“Tell me that you don’t want me,” his hands moved up to her shoulders, pushing her down slowly so that he could hover over her on the couch. “Tell me that you don’t want *us*. ”

“I want it,” she said, opening her eyes. “I want you.”

His lips met hers, and it was like his body was on fire. Their kiss was slow. His lips moved against hers, deep and sensual, and hers reacted in kind. It was so fucking good and he couldn’t bring himself to believe it was happening.

He could taste the faint trace of Merlot, and he simply couldn’t get enough. His hands were trying hard to keep still. He wanted so badly to touch her, but he didn’t want to push too far. He trailed his lips down her neck, listening to the hitch of her breath as he sucked at the sensitive skin. He let his tongue slid down, and he fought the urge to grin as she gripped at his hair.

He made his way back up her throat, taking his sweet time as he eventually recaptured her lips. Joyce shuddered underneath him, and he stopped kissing her to look at her. She smiled up at him, a mixture of pleasure and confusion.

“What?” she asked, and he realized how good it felt to have her small hands gripping onto his arms.

“I just had to look at you,” he said. “And remind myself that this is real.”

“Okay,” Joyce laughed. “But, when you’re done, you should keep kissing me.”

Hopper chuckled, nodding. He didn’t need to be told that twice.

His lips met hers again, and everything was right.

25. Chapter 25

Lonnie really was a piece of shit.

Joyce was staring her ex husband in the eyes, refusing to back down from the absurd request he was demanding from her at God knows what hour. He hadn't so much as checked in on Will since he had returned from the Upside Down, and he had the nerve to show up and tell her he was there to get his fucking dog back.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said, shaking her head, "You drove all the way here just to get the dog?"

"Yes," he slurred, the distinct smell of whiskey hitting her. "You got everything, Joycie, at least give a man his dog."

She had refused to let him inside the house, afraid that whatever he wanted would result in waking up the boys. She didn't want them involved in this, especially after everything else. If she couldn't protect them from other worldly monsters, she could certainly protect them from this one.

"Can you even tell me his name?" Joyce sighed, crossing her arms as a burst of cold air made her shiver. She was still in her pajamas, an over-sized t-shirt and some old sweat pants she had hastily thrown on when she heard Lonnie screaming outside. She really shouldn't have been outside in this, but she refused to budge and go inside when Lonnie was bound to follow.

"Fuck's his name?" Lonnie muttered out loud to himself. He furrowed his brow and Joyce stood there with a blank face as she watched him try and put his drunk thoughts together. He quickly grew frustrated with himself and sent her a glare. "What's it matter? He's my fucking dog."

"It's Chester," she said.

"Who the hell picked out that stupid name?" he scoffed, leaning up against the house.

“You did,” she rolled her eyes.

“Oh,” he squinted and then laughed as it sank in. “No, shit. I guess it’s not that bad of a name.”

“You’re unbelievable, sometimes.”

“Chester!” Lonnie suddenly began to scream out. “C’mere boy! Chester!”

“Lonnie, shut up! You’re going to wake everyone up!”

“Just go get me my dog and I’ll go,” he poked a finger at her chest.

“You’re really just here to get the dog?” Joyce couldn’t hold it back any longer. She shoved his finger away. “You don’t even care that Will’s back. You’ve checked on him *once* . Once, Lonnie! He’s been so scared and his own father can’t even bother with a phone call!”

“Hey!” he frowned. “It’s not my fault he’s a pussy!”

“He isn’t- what the hell is wrong with you?” Joyce yelled at him. “You have no idea what he’s been through and you don’t even try to know!”

“You don’t want me here,” Lonnie hissed back at her, stepping closer. “You only want me around for these kids when it’s convenient for you.”

Joyce stared at him, anger surging through her body.

“You say you don’t want me around, but then look, here I am, and you’re telling me to fucking leave!” he grabbed her wrist, and brought his face close to hers.

“Because you’re never actually here for just them!” Joyce didn’t flinch. She tugged against him, trying to pull herself away from his grip. “You’re here right now, but it’s not for them!”

“It is,” he insisted.

“How? Why do you even want the dog, Lonnie? Cut the bullshit.”

"If I have the dog, it'll give the kids a reason to visit," he admitted, and Joyce fought the urge to feel even a shred of sadness for him. He released her wrists and shrank away, hunching his shoulders in defeat. "They never visit me. They don't call. It works both ways."

"Not really," Joyce frowned, glancing down at her wrists. Even in the moonlight, she could see the angry red that would undoubtedly begin to bruise. "They don't contact you because you're a shitty father."

Lonnie looked over at her. His eyes raked over her frame, and she quickly felt vulnerable. He was looking at her like she an object for him to claim. His eyes slowly made their up her body and they stopped to stare into her own eyes. "You've always had such an attitude."

"Lonnie—"

"I'm not asking anymore," he said, and the tone of his voice sent a small shiver down her spine, and she was suddenly reminded of the really bad nights when he had come home in the past and said those exact words.

She realized this was a fight she couldn't win. She couldn't overpower him, and the way he was looking at her made her feel sick. She swallowed, edging towards the door.

"I'll get the dog," she told him, and he stepped to follow her. "You have to wait here. Okay?"

"Fine," he agreed.

Joyce sighed in relief and moved inside, shutting the door behind her. Her thoughts were a flurry as she tried to remember where she put the dogs leash last. She went over to the laundry room and began to scrounge through a basket, finding exactly what she was looking for. Chester had followed after her, wondering if he was getting to go on a walk. She grabbed the dogs leash, connecting it to his collar.

"I'm sorry," she bent down and gave the dog a few pats, smiling sadly as he licked her.

As she made her way back, she stopped by the phone, quickly dialing

a number she had memorized to heart recently.

“Pick up, Hop,” she whispered into the phone, nervously glancing at the door.

The phone continued to ring, and she was about to give up when his muffled voice came through.

“Hello?” he asked, and it was clear he had just woken up.

“Jim,” she said. She sighed out his name in a shaky breath, which seemed to wake him up immediately.

“Joyce,” he said. “What’s wrong? Is everything okay? Is it Will?”

“Lonnie is here. He’s drunk. He’s taking the dog, and he should be leaving, but...” she trailed off, unsure if she could finish.

“I’m on the way,” he said gruffly, and she was met with the sound of the call ending.

Joyce placed the phone down and made her way to the door. She opened it, and Chester led, obliviously happy to see Lonnie. The dog wagged his tail, licking Lonnie with glee. Joyce wordlessly held the leash out to him. He took it from her, eyeing the dog skeptically.

“Thanks, babe,” he said. The way he spoke so casually made her want to scream at him all over again, but she bit her tongue, trying instead to plaster on a smile.

“Alright, well,” she gestured. “Take care of him.”

“I’m great with dogs,” Lonnie tugged on the leash. “Don’t you remember?”

Joyce watched helplessly as Lonnie loaded Chester into the car.

“When the boys come to visit, don’t be a stranger,” he winked at her, eyeing her again with lust. He got into the car, starting up the engine.

Joyce stood frozen, and her eyes started to blur with tears as his taillights disappeared from view. It was foolish for her to cry, but she

couldn't help it. It wasn't even about the dog. Sure, she cared about Chester and she didn't want anything bad to happen to him, but she wasn't crying because he was gone.

Lonnie had made her feel truly powerless once again.

She couldn't do anything. He has waltzed right in and demanded something and she had to comply. She hated to admit to admit to herself that even after all this she was afraid of him. If she hadn't given in...she hated to think about what would have happened.

What was she going to tell Will? She had already let him down so much in these past few months.

Joyce stood there, wiping at her tears until she saw another pair of lights in the distance, Hopper's car standing out to her even in the darkness. She had no idea how it was even possible for him to be there that fast, but he was. He was out of the car as soon as it was parked, rushing up to her.

"Jesus, Joyce, it's freezing out," he shrugged out of his jacket and held it out to her as he approached. His eyes widened as he saw her glassy eyes. "What did he do? Are you hurt? I swear to God, I'll break that asshole's jaw."

"No," she shook her head, accepting his jacket. The lie came easily. Hopper's eyes scanned her, and the difference in his gaze was striking. He looked at her like she was something precious, like she was something to protect. His jacket covered her wrists and he seemed to believe her.

"He took the dog?" Hopper asked, his anger clearly present. "You want him back? I'll go get him."

"No!" she said, and the fear in her voice startled them both. "I just- if you go get Chester, Lonnie will come back and...I really don't want him to come back."

"Joyce," Hopper turned, placing his hand gently on her arm. "You're safe now."

"But I'm not," she shook her head. She hated herself as she felt a tear

escape. “I thought- he still has so much power over me. I can’t even keep the dog from him. I wanted to- I really did. He just- he made me feel so scared, Hop.”

“Hey, you don’t ever have to be scared of him again,” he said it with such certainty that she wanted to believe him.

“He’s my problem, and you can’t always be there.” she knew he was about to protest, his mouth opening slightly and she stopped him. “You can’t. And I thought after everything- I mean, we went to that awful place to get Will, and we saw that *thing*. I thought I could at least keep Lonnie from stealing the dog.”

Hopper’s frowning at her. “He’s hurt you before, Joyce. It’s okay to get scared of people like that.”

“What am I going to tell Jonathan and Will?” she asked. “He said he wanted the dog so they’d come visit him more. He made himself sound so pathetic. Somehow, I’m the bad guy in all this.”

“You’re not the bad guy,” he said. “I’ve met a lot of bad people, and trust me, you’re not one of them.”

“I’m just so tired of being afraid,” she whispered to him.

She hated how the monsters in the world seemed so determined to drag her family down.

But, right now, she hated herself more for not being able to stop them before they hurt those she loved.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hate Lonnie, but I love writing about him...

26. Chapter 26

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce is the best mom!

Joyce hears a faint knocking on the door, rattling her from her comfortable sleep, and she assumes the worst. Only one person seemed to have a knack for coming to her place in the middle of the night and disrupting everything. She glances at the clock, her vision still blurred from sleep, and makes out that it's a little after two in the morning. Hopper is still asleep next to her, and she is surprised that he isn't awake. Usually, he is more alert than her when it comes to these kinds of things. She pushes the covers off of her and quickly throws on the clothing he had stripped off of her earlier and carelessly tossed on the floor. She casts a look back at him sleeping peacefully and smiles at the sight, shaking her head with fondness as she makes her way towards the door to deal with whatever the heck Lonnie wants.

The knocking hasn't persisted, and for a moment, she wonders if she had imagined it. If it was Lonnie, surely he would be screaming out by now with irritation for having to wait. She furrows her brow as she approaches, unlocking the door and opening it.

She is surprised to see that Lonnie Byers isn't the one standing on her front porch.

No.

It's Maxine Mayfield.

The redheaded girl is standing there with her skateboard in hand. Her cheeks are flushed, and she looks to be out of breath. Joyce can't help but wonder exactly how far the girl must have traveled to get here. Where exactly did she live again? She's looking up at Joyce with worried eyes, and it's obvious she's been crying.

"Max?" Joyce's voice is low, and she opens her arms to welcome her in. "Sweetie, what's wrong?"

Max wordlessly accepts her invitation and steps into the hug. She clutches onto Joyce with such a sudden force that the woman stumbles back a bit. Joyce runs her hands up and down her back, feeling the girl's body tremble.

"I'm s-sorry," she whispers. "I didn't know where else to go."

"Don't be sorry," Joyce assures her. "You know you can always come here."

Max nods against her.

"Here, let's go inside. We can talk, or I can set you up somewhere to sleep. Whatever you want. How's that sound?"

Max nods again and releases her grip on her. She lets Joyce lead her into the house. They make their way into the living room, and Joyce turns on a lamp. It's bright enough to give them light, but it won't wake up the whole house. Max sits on the couch, and Joyce grabs her a blanket out of a closet and hands it to her.

"My parents were fighting," Max says as she unfolds the blanket and wraps it around her.

Joyce has heard all about Max's parents from the kids. She's heard about Billy's dad and it's easy to make comparisons to her own experience with abusive men, but she's tried hard not to form an impression based on random snippets from kids. She doesn't want to think about how the kids describe her. However, with the way Max is looking at her, Joyce knows that it's more than just normal bickering, and maybe everything she's heard is true.

"It's not usually this bad," Max says, and Joyce's own ears burn as she hears the same words she's used herself to try and make light of things. "It's normally just yelling. Just mean words, maybe throwing or breaking something."

"Tonight was different," Joyce says softly.

Max nods and she is starting to cry again. "He *never* hits her. It was my fault. I shouldn't have said anything, but he was so mad and I just wanted him to stop yelling at my mom."

Joyce felt an insurmountable guilt rise in her as she wondered how many times Jonathan or Will felt this way.

“Max, honey, this isn’t your fault,” Joyce says. “The way he acts it never your fault. Okay?”

“But then he hit her and I just left!” Max cries. “I got my skateboard and I left!”

“It’s not your fault,” Joyce assures her.

“I hate him,” Max says. “I hate him so much.”

Joyce nods, and she knows nothing she says will ease her pain. Still, she wants Max to know she is there for her.

“It’s okay to hate him,” Joyce says.

Max looks up at her with shock. “It is?”

“It took me a long time to realize that,” Joyce sighed. “And it took me an even longer time to realize that not everyone is like this. I made a lot of excuses.”

“My actual dad was never like this,” Max sniffles, wiping at her face. “They fought, but it was normal. I don’t know why my mom sticks around for this new guy when my dad was way better.”

“I can’t answer that,” Joyce says. “But, it’s important for you to remember that there are good men, just like your dad back in California. Look at Lucas. They’re both good to you.”

Max smiled a bit, a faint blush coming to her cheeks at the mention of her boyfriend. “Yeah, they’re okay, I guess.”

They spent a moment in silence, taking in what had just transpired. Joyce was letting Max try to regain herself, her crying coming to an end. Their brief silence was cut short, however, by the thunderous sound of feet stomping towards them.

“Joyce!” Hopper yells out. “I swear to God, if it’s that jackass-” he stops in his tracks, seeing the two of them sitting there. His mouth

falls open in surprise and he seems completely and utterly stunned. Joyce eyes him with a smirk, and Max is clearly fighting a case of giggles herself.

The sound is welcomed to Joyce, even if it's at Hopper's expense.

"Hi Chief," Max says, covering her eyes with her hand.

"What are you doing-" Hopper catches Joyce's gaze and suddenly notices why they're both smiling at him. He's standing there in nothing but his boxers. "*Shit* !"

Joyce and Max let of a string of laughter that is certainly loud enough to wake up the house as Hopper dashes back to their room, his face red with embarrassment.

"I'm glad you didn't give up," Max says as she continues to laugh. "Hopper is a good one, too."

Joyce smiles at her. "He really is."

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay in updating. I've honestly been in more of a reading mood than a writing mood. Hopefully I get out of that slump soon. Hope you enjoyed this! I laughed while imagining it.

27. Chapter 27

Summary for the Chapter:

What if Joyce died instead of Hopper?

Hopper feels a throbbing in the back of his head, but he forces himself up, fighting the urge to collapse as the world around him spins. He blinks, not fully processing everything that happened and he knows he concussed. Hopper shakes his head, and as his vision becomes a bit clearer he sees something that makes his blood run cold, and suddenly everything starts getting pieced together.

Joyce is standing there. That Russian asshole who knocked him out is there, dead at her feet. She's clutching the gun, and she's trembling as she stares down at his lifeless body. He can tell she's in shock over the fact that she's just killed someone. Hopper screams out for her.

She hears him, and he wonders why she doesn't move. She looks up at him and as their eyes lock, Hopper understands. She stuck. She's fucking stuck. She can't get out from where she is and he feels the panic surge through him. He has to blow it up, and she can't move.

Hopper faintly hears the kids screaming at him through the walkie-talkie, but he isn't even sure whose voice it is at this point. They're yelling at him like their lives depend on it, and yeah, they really do, but he can't focus on that, because all he can do is stare at Joyce like there is another option. Joyce looks at him. She blinks back tears, and he knows what she wants. There isn't any other option. They have to blow up the machine

She nods at him.

He can feel the tears starting to run down his cheeks as he stares down at her. He doesn't know how he does it, but he does.

He manages to turn both keys, and screams out every expletive he knows as he watches the machine explode, taking Joyce out with it.

Hopper doesn't know how long he stands there, his body shaking as

he tries to process what's just happened. He feels empty and the pain in his head feels dull compared to the ripping of his heart.

At some point, his feet have carried him down, and he feels like his body is shutting down as he takes in the sight. Everything is wrecked, and there is no way anybody could have survived it. He had to look for her body, if there even is one. He hears a strangled sob escape his lips, and he hardly recognizes that it comes from him. Hopper tries to take a step forward, but he feels a hand touch him.

"Jim!" Murray shouts at him. He's out of breath and his eyes are wide underneath his thick glasses. "Where's Joyce? We have to go, *now*!"

Hopper can't form words. He can't even bring himself to look over at the man standing beside him.

"Jim?" Murray asks, and the realization hits him. "S-she can't be."

Hopper's crying now, his shoulders sagging. He hears Murray continue to try and process it, but then he's pulling Jim out with all his strength. He's guiding them both out when bright lights shine in their faces. Murray raises his hands, and Hopper somehow manages to do the same. The military is finally there, but they're too late.

Joyce is dead, and it's all his fault.

They're being escorted out. Hopper realizes Sam Owens is there, and he sees him talking to Murray, sending him eyes filled with pity. Something in Hopper snaps. It's not tears he has, but rage.

"I told you it was a two man job," he says lowly, and Murray looks over at him. His friend looks tired and filled with his own grief, but Hopper doesn't care. "I didn't want her to go. I told you both it was too dangerous, and you- *you insisted she come with us.*"

"Jim, I didn't think that-"

"What? You didn't think she would fucking die?"

"Do you think I wanted this?" Murray asks in shock. "I know what she meant to you!"

“You don’t know shit!”

Sam frowns, delicately stepping forward to intervene.. “I know you’re both upset, but it’s not-

“Not what? Hopper sneers. “Both of you can go to hell.”

He stalks away before either of them can stop him, and as he’s walking away, he sees the kids waiting there for them.

El looks so relieved to see him, and she starts to smile at him. It stops short, however, when he gets closer and she’s the redness in his eyes and the clenched fists. Will is looking frantically around, and when he sees Hopper, he darts over.

“Where is she? Where is my mom?” Will asks him.

Hopper looks between the two of them, and he tells himself to hold it together. He can’t fall apart on them. He has to be strong. Joyce would have done the same if the roles had been reversed.

“I’m sorry, kid,” he says, and his voice breaks.

Will blinks as he takes this in. El’s lip begins to wobble, tears starting to stream down her face as she realizes what he means. He expects Will to join her, but the boy is staring at Hopper with an anger that rivaled his own. He jumps towards Hopper, banging his fists into him.

“No! You were suppose to protect her! You were suppose to keep her safe,” he cries out. “She can’t be dead!”

Hopper barely holds him back, letting him hit him as hard as he wants. He deserves it. after all. Will is right. Hopper should have protected her. He was too weak, and now she’s gone.

“She trusted you! I trusted you!” Will shrieks.

“Maybe she isn’t?” El says, and there is the slightest bit of hope that makes it all the more painful for him.

Hopper can only shake his head. “She is.”

He stands there, letting Will attack him as he listens to El cry harder. He doesn't know where Jonathan is, and he doesn't know how he's going to tell him that Joyce is dead.

All Hopper knows is it should have been him instead.

28. Chapter 28

Summary for the Chapter:

Will and El see *Star Wars* ...

Will Byers sat at the table across from El, his smile aglow with joy. His mom scooped some coleslaw onto his plate and he wasn't even bothered because he had finally got the chance to show El one of his all time favorite movies: *Star Wars*. He had been a bit nervous at first, but the thrill of seeing his favorite movie took over everything.

As he dug into his food, the effects from the film were fleeing and his thoughts returned to El. What if she didn't like it? What if she didn't understand the depth in the plot? They hadn't really gotten the chance to discuss her thoughts. As soon as the movie was over, her attention was back on Mike and the whole time Mrs. Wheeler drove them home, nobody even mentioned the movie. It was ridiculous. Will had sat in silence reliving his favorite parts while the others talked about their lives.

"How was the movie?" Hopper was his saving grace as he asked the oh so important question, cutting into his chicken with vigor.

"It was awesome!" El said. "They have magic powers!"

Will blinked hard.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly define the Force as magic powers..." he argued. "It's much more than that."

"Yeah," El agreed easily. "And they have these colorful swords called lightsabers. They're like green and blue, and...Oh yeah, red!"

"I'm glad you liked it," Hopper offered a smile.

"Will has loved it for so long but nobody else ever took as strong of an interest." Joyce commented. "Jonathan always called him a little Luke Sky- something?"

"Luke Skywalker, Mom," Will told her. "Out of all the characters, I'm

most like Luke.”

“Really?” El asked. “I kind of thought I was more like Luke.”

Will frowned. “What? How?!”

“He has magical powers, and he has the whole evil dad situation,” El said it like it was obvious.

Hopper and Joyce exchanged a glance.

“But- But if you’re Luke, who would I be?” Will placed down his silverware and looked at her seriously.

“Hmm,” she looked thoughtful. “Probably Princess Leia. You needed me to save you, but you’re really tough without me.”

“You think I should be Princess Leia?!” Will was beside himself. “You should be Princess Leia!”

Hopper noticed that this could potentially ruin the evening if it continued to escalate and decided to interject himself in.

“So, who would I be in this Star Wars universe?”

“Han Solo,” the two of them said in unison, never taking their eyes off the other.

Joyce let out a little giggle at that. She didn’t really know the characters, but she enjoyed how quickly the two agreed on who Hopper would be.

“Who?” Hopper asked. “What’s he like?”

“He’s a smuggler,” El said, breaking her gaze with Will and looking over at her dad. “He has ship called the Millennium Falcon and he is the one who helps Luke rescue Leia. He’s pretty cool.”

“He can also make the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs,” Will added as if that would mean anything to Hopper.

“Wait a minute, you both realize I’m a Chief, right? Why would you

say im a smuggler?" Hopper questioned.

"You just are," El said.

"Trust us," Will nodded. "You're just like him."

"Okay, well then what about Joyce?" he asked, noticing that their earlier feud was seemingly forgotten for the time being.

"Who would she be?" El wondered.

She looked over to Will for his opinion.

"This is hard. Jonathan and I have talked about it a lot, and we decided that she's the golden droid, C3-PO."

"What? I'm the robot thing?" Joyce asked.

"Oh, that makes sense!" El said. "He is really smart, but he also gets super nervous a lot."

Joyce gave them an affronted look.

"So I'm a criminal and your mom is a robot?" Hopper asked. "Sounds like a really good movie."

"It's the best!" El nodded. "I can't wait to watch it again."

"Next time we watch it, I'll show you just exactly why I'm Luke and you're Leia," Will said.

"You wish, laser brains," El retorted

"See! That's a Leia quote!"

"Just because I quote her doesn't mean anything. You never quote Luke!"

"Yes I do!"

El rolled her eyes. "Yeah? Like what?"

"I've made reference to how I used to bullseye womp rats in my

T-16!”

“I’ve never heard you say that!”

Joyce looked over at Hopper with raised eyebrows. He expected her to say something in regard to the children’s bickering, but she didn’t seem too concerned about that.

“Why am I the robot?” she asked, confusion colored on her face.

“Joyce,” he laughed, enjoying how that’s really what she was focused on while their kids yelled out random quotes. “I have no idea what’s even going on right now.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I know some people wanted a sequel to the previous chapter, which I still plan on doing. I just hadn't updated in a while and this kind of wrote itself. I know it's a little silly, but I still hope you liked it (:

29. Chapter 29

Summary for the Chapter:

Pt 2 - if Joyce had died instead of Hopper

Hopper isn't sure how many times Murray has called him. He hasn't answered him once, and he honestly doesn't have anything to say. He knows he'll only cuss the man out. It's not Murray's fault that everything was ripped away from him, but he knows he'll blame him in the heat of the moment anyways. Hopper doesn't know which he fears more- the fury he would unleash on Murray or the insurmountable amount of pity his friend would surely give him.

Time doesn't seem to have any meaning, but it's certainly been passing by without him acknowledging much. The kids have gone back to school and he knows he's been an absent parent. After everything, Will came to live with him and El. They never contacted Lonnie to tell him what happened, and he hadn't tried to get in contact with them anyways. Hopper didn't want Will living with his dad, and he was positive Joyce wouldn't want that either. Luckily for them, Lonnie was such a dead beat that it never really became an issue.

Will had been angry, but he had adjusted well enough, all things considered. Some nights were worse than others, but he was managing.

It wasn't that simple with Jonathan. With a few screaming matches and too many tears to count, Jonathan had moved out to go to college like he always dreamed. He came back around to visit Will, even talked to him on the phone daily, but he barely spoke to Hopper.

He couldn't blame the boy either. He could hardly live with himself.

Murray had called five times already that morning, all which went unanswered. Hopper was getting ready to take the kids to school when he heard a knock at the door. Before he could answer it, Eleven was throwing it open to see who was there. She'd taken on a very

independent streak as of late, doing things without necessarily thinking about all of the consequences. He figured it was from losing her powers on top of all the other stressors of her life. Hopper came up behind her, and he was on the verge of scolding her about the danger of opening the door to strangers. However, before he could, the sight of Murray on his front porch knocked the breath out of him. The man looked as frazzled as always, glasses resting on the edge of his nose as his eyes frantically scanned the documents in his hand. He glanced up at the sound of the door opening.

“Go away!” Hopper shouted immediately, moving to stand in front of El.

“Jim,” Murray said.

“Murray, seriously, get the hell out of here!”

“ *We found her.* ”

Hopper felt his heart stop.

He registered Will coming forward and asking questions. *Where is my mom? Are you sure it's her? You said she was dead! Where is she?!* The boy was asking every question that Hopper knew he should be asking instead, but his mind had become blank and he couldn't form words. He stood there like a statue, staring at Murray with wide eyes. He heard El crying tears of joy, faintly registering that she was clutching onto his arm with happiness.

Was this real?

She was alive?

Murray was talking fast. He and Owens had been in contact with a spy they had in Russia and they had a detained American prisoner. They weren't sure who it was at first, considering they assumed she was dead. They had a few other people that they speculated it might be, but now they knew.

Joyce was alive.

The next thing he knew, Hopper was with Murray and Sam Owens on

the way to some Russian base. He had left the kids behind, much to their dismay. Dr. Owens had warned it wasn't safe to bring Eleven or Will, considering how much they knew about the Upside Down. If somehow their security was breached, the kids could be in a lot of danger. It felt wrong, and he knew that they would never forgive him. There was also the risk that Joyce wasn't actually alive. What if Hopper brought the kids all the way there and she wasn't alive? What if it was a trap and this so called spy had betrayed them? It was just too risky.

After God knows how many hours, they were finally there. Russian words that sounded far too harsh were echoing across the room. Murray and Owens had been filling Hopper in on everything, and there was honestly so much to try and comprehend. He was trying his best to pay attention, but his mind was only on Joyce. It wasn't long before they could tell he wasn't exactly interested in the finer details right now, and they eventually fell into an uncomfortable silence.

They were waiting in some white room when two men walked in. Sam stood up abruptly, recognition flashing in his eyes. He turned, and told Hopper and Murray to wait there, and he disappeared behind a door with the two enormous men.

Murray was still frantically reading over those documents, and Hopper wondered what he was doing. Out of all the things they mentioned, none of it seemed like it would contain the excess amount of paperwork he had. He wanted to ask, but the guilt he was carrying was weighing him down so much that he couldn't bring himself to.

Hopper was such an idiot.

"You never gave up," he said, causing Murray to look up at him. "Even after I told you she was dead. Even after I ignored you for months."

"I just asked myself, what would Joyce Byers do?" he joked.

It fell flat.

"She wouldn't have given up if it had been me," Hopper closed his eyes and leaned back.

"No," Murray agreed. "She'd have torn down all of Russia trying to find you."

"I saw her die," he heard the crack in his voice and swallowed thickly. "She died right in front of me."

"I know, Jim," he said. "She won't blame you for this."

Hopper shook his head. "I didn't even look for her! I just- I gave up and she was out there all this time..."

Murray didn't respond. He looked away, and gave a long sigh.

"Jesus, what's wrong with me? Why didn't I-"

"You can ask yourself all the questions in the world. Why didn't I do this? Why didn't I do that? It won't change anything," Murray said.

Hopper gave him a long look.

"I don't say that to be an ass," Murray said. "I know how you feel. I've had a lot of guilt with...with Alexei. I spent a lot of time focusing on what ifs, but lingering on what could have been is just a waste of time. You need to stop thinking about how you've been checked out and simply check back in. You have to be here for *her* now, just like how I'm trying to be there for *him*. That's why I requested his files. I wanted to know what I could do to help. Maybe he has family out there and I can tell them that he didn't die in vain."

"You're right," Hopper said, glancing at Alexei's papers in his hands. "You're always right."

His friend was clever, and he didn't sugarcoat anything. He told Jim like it was, and he certainly needed that brutal honesty right now.

"Tell me something I don't know," Murray quipped.

The two men shared a brief laugh, their smiles fading from their faces as the door opened. The two of them scrambled to their feet immediately. The giant men from earlier were in front, and following close behind them was Sam Owens and a tattered woman with a shaved head.

A small, entirely too thin woman who was almost unrecognizable.

She was clutching onto Sam with such vigor that it looked painful. He was helping her walk, most of her body weight leaning onto him for support. She was pale to the point she almost looked sickly.

“Joyce,” Hopper breathed out her name.

Her large brown eyes shot to his with a wide fright, and if he wasn't sure it was her before, he knew now with absolute certainty. He would know her eyes anywhere.

She looked startled to see him, and for a moment, he wasn't sure she would recognize him. He had no idea what she had been through, but the lack of hair and malnourished look she had made him feel sick to his stomach.

“See, I told you he was here,” Dr Owens said soothingly. “This is real. We're going to take you home.”

“Hop?” she whispered, blinking slow.

Hopper gravitated toward her, his feet moving before he could think. She let go of Sam and reached out to him. Hopper caught her before she could fall forward. His arms felt massive around her, and he was so terrified that she might break. She was always a lot smaller than him, but she never felt this fragile. He felt her trembling and he knew that he was probably doing the same.

He pulled back slightly, his hands cupping her cheek. .

“It's you,” she cried, looking up at him like he was her savior.

“I'm here,” he told her. “I'm right here.”

She nodded. Hopper's thumb absently rubbed her cheek and she closed her eyes, leaning into his touch.

“Are you real?” she asked.

“Yes,” he promised her.

She didn't seem convinced.

"You've said that before," she said this, and his heart broke. "And you're never real."

"I promise I'm real," he said. "I'll prove it to you."

Joyce opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I know that you love rainy days, and the smell of fresh cut grass. I know that you think you're a terrible cook, but you make the best runny mashed potatoes that I've ever had. I know that your hands are always cold, even if you're not. I know that your favorite candy is dark chocolate, and I know that you like to have a glass of red wine after a long day. I know that you love art, and that you even have some talent yourself. You always tried to deny it, but I remember seeing some of your doodles back in eleventh grade."

Hopper smiled at her.

"I know that you have a scar on your left knee from that time we were climbing that tree in my backyard and you fell. You hate small talk, but could talk for hours to the people you love. I know that you secretly like cliché romance movies. I know that you like to watch sunsets, and that your favorite constellation is Andromeda. I know that you're unbelievably kind and that your smile lights up a room. I know that you don't always know your own worth, but that's okay because I know that you are worth *everything*, Joyce."

Joyce was smiling at him, her eyes watering.

"It's really you," she flung her arms back around him and pressed her face into his chest.

Hopper hugged her back, the two of them holding each other like they were the only ones left in the world.

Notes for the Chapter:

brb, gonna go cry after writing this...

30. Chapter 30

Hopper grinned at the sight before him, sharing an amused look with Karen. The Sinclair's were throwing a Super Bowl Party, and despite it not even being halftime yet, Joyce and Ted had managed to get drunk together. Hopper was completely baffled when he saw the two of them talking together, laughing and chatting like they were old friends. He knew Ted and Lonnie had been casual friends, but he hadn't really considered that Joyce and Ted would have any kind of relationship. It was foolish, he realized in hindsight. Their kids were friends, and Joyce and Karen weren't exactly strangers. It made sense for the two of them to be friendly with each other. Still, he was thrown off when the two of them had started some odd drinking game.

Karen also seemed to be surprised by that.

"Is this really happening?" Karen asked Hopper with disbelief.

"Maybe they aren't as drunk as we think," he offered weakly, watching as Ted doubled over with laughter.

Karen laughed. "I can't remember the last time I saw Ted drunk. I've only seen the two of them get drunk together twice before, and they act like complete fools everytime."

"Yeah, it's certainly been a long time," Hopper agreed even though he couldn't think of a single occasion he had seen it himself. He figured it must have been when Joyce was still with Lonnie. Or maybe if it had been back in high school he had been too drunk himself to remember it.

"It's nice to see them like this," she admitted. "If I had to bet on which of us would have gotten drunk tonight, I probably would've said you and me."

"Yeah," he chuckled. "You're not wrong."

"I mean, they're both just so introverted at times. It took a lot of convincing to get Ted to come to this. He like football, but he hates

going to things like this. He never wants to go out of the house! Although, his lack of going out is just him being lazy and antisocial. I know Joyce's has more to do with anxiety."

Hopper glanced over at her. If anyone else had said it, he might have been irritated at them for suggesting that. However, he knew that out of all people, Karen didn't mean anything bad by it.

"Do you think that's why they're drinking?" Hopper joked, but there was a small bit of seriousness behind his question. It would make a lot more sense that way.

"Drinking away the nerves?" Karen mused. "Not a bad idea. Why don't we go ask them? Half-time is pretty much started. Nothing can happen in twenty two seconds anyways."

Hopper was going to tell her that a lot could actually happen in that amount of time, but he knew it was a bit irrelevant. He had been watching the game intensely, but the sound of laughter had caught his attention several times. Now, he really was more curious about a drunk Joyce Byers and Ted Wheeler. He followed Karen to where Joyce and Ted were lingering in the kitchen, their giggles loud and mirthful.

"Oh! Look who it is!" Ted smiled. "The Chief of Police!"

"And your wife," Karen rolled her eyes at him, placing a hand on her hip.

"You two having fun back here?" Hopper asked, eyeing Joyce.

Her cheeks were flushed and she was grinning madly up at him. "Of course. We're talking about stuff."

"Stuff?" Hopper quirked a brow. "What kind of stuff?"

"It's a secret!" Joyce giggled more, sending a mischievous look over at Ted.

"Top secret. Totally classified." Ted agreed. He tried to look serious but then started laughing himself.

“How much have you had to drink?” Karen wondered.

Ted looked over at Joyce.

“Another secret?” he suggested.

“Another secret!” Joyce kept snickering, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Okay,” Hopper shook his head fondly. “You two are cut off for the night.”

“Agreed,” Karen reached over and grabbed both their cups.

“What? Why?” Joyce frowned at them.

Her eyes were wide and she pouted up at Hopper. He suddenly felt compelled to give her whatever she wanted, even if it was against his better judgement. He looked away from her quickly, knowing he would give in.

“Stop acting like police,” Ted complained. “We’re just having a good time.”

“He isn’t acting,” Joyce pointed out, gesturing to Hopper.

Ted looked confused for a moment, then suddenly pieced it together. He started chuckling and gave a shrug.

“Oh, well I guess in that case we really do have to listen,” he threw his hands up in defeat.

“I’ll get you both some water,” Karen offered as she tossed their drinks into the trash.

Ted decided he would try and help his wife, walking over to her and flirtatiously placing his hands on her waist. Hopper found it amusing how different Ted seemed to be after a few drinks.

“Are you having a good time?” Joyce’s sweet voice caught his attention and he smiled at her.

“My team is losing,” he shrugged. “But you seem to be enjoying yourself.”

Joyce nodded enthusiastically and then motioned for him to come closer. “Come here.”

Hopper gave her a confused look, but complied. He stepped closer to her and she got on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Hopper wasn’t sure why she did that, but he certainly wasn’t complaining.

“I don’t think I can drive us home,” she said sheepishly as she stepped back from him.

“That’s okay,” he said.

“I tried to match Ted drinking. I don’t think I should’ve, but I didn’t want to lose.”

“Hmm. Probably not. You’re a lightweight.”

Joyce scoffed at him, hitting him in the chest. “I am not!”

“Did you win?” Hopper chuckled.

“No,” she bit her lip. “But I might’ve won if you and Karen hadn’t stopped us!”

“Seems like we’re both losers tonight,” he glanced back at the television

“But you’re a cute loser,” Joyce poked him, giggling.

Hopper grinned at her. She was so adorable. Completely and utterly drunk, but also adorable.

A few years ago, his whole night would’ve been ruined by his team losing, but with Joyce looking at him like that, it was hard to care about anything else at all.

31. Chapter 31

Summary for the Chapter:

Set in S1, ep 8

“...And then we’re going to forget that any of this ever happened,” Hopper spoke slowly, his words hanging heavy in the air.

“Oh, is that right?” the blonde haired woman, known as agent Connie Frazier, asked him. Her arms were crossed and her eyes were narrowed down to thin slits.

None of this had gone the way he had planned. They were supposed to sneak in, get Will Byers, and get out. Instead, they had been apprehended and despite his protests, Joyce was whisked away from his side and he had no idea what they were doing to her. She hadn’t stayed silent like he told her to, and he shouldn’t have been surprised. She had shouted out protests, and he tried to tell her to calm down.

They put handcuffs on her, and then he began to really panic. He was thrashing, threatening them. He could handle anything they threw at him, but he couldn’t handle anything bad happening to Joyce.

They took her out of sight.

Then they tased him and brought him to this room.

Hopper glared up at the blonde woman, his heart thudding erratically in his chest. He still felt his neck tingling from the taser they had struck him with again only moments ago. Despite the pain, he mustered up his most deadly expression.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

She held his gaze, sensing his severity. She never looked away from him as she spoke to the other men in the room. “Go get Brenner.”

One of the men followed her order immediately.

Hopper expected her to taunt him in some way. He expected her to continue to talk to him about his demise. Go on about how believable their story was going to be. How he really was just some junkie cop and nobody would question his overdose. Instead, they remained silent. They merely stood there and stared at him like he was dirt that had been carelessly drug in by a child.

He was surprised by how quickly Brenner arrived. He had a sour look on his face as he entered, and he looked at Hopper expectantly. Hopper noticed he entered alone, the man sent to retrieve him gone.

“She surely has a way with words,” Brenner stood in front of his chair, his presence looming.

He didn’t say her name, but he knew exactly who he meant. Brenner had been with Joyce. What did he want with her? What did he do to her? His mind flashed with images of Joyce being treated the same way as him, and he felt a haze of red blur his vision. He couldn’t even imagine them tazing a woman, but he was reminded of how they treated that little girl, and he knew they were capable of doing unspeakable things.

“So small, but so full of fire,” Brenner said. “I simply asked her a question, and she told me to go to hell.”

Connie Frazier bristled at this, while Hopper felt a tug of satisfaction at Joyce telling him off. The feeling was brief, however, as he thought of how a comment like that could have resulted in her getting hurt.

“If you did anything to Joyce...” Hopper threatened.

“I haven’t done a thing to her. But, what will she do to herself?” Brenner cocked his head to the side. “A mother torn apart by grief? A woman who has had severe anxiety problems in the past? Struggling to make ends meet? Joyce Byers was already considered crazy. Now she has also lost her youngest child. Would anyone find her suicide suspicious?”

Hopper stared at him, refusing to back down. What he was suggesting made him feel sick, and it frightened him at how believable that story

could actually be. He knew Joyce would never give up like that, but very few people knew her like he did.

“Really, the two of you made this so easy for us,” Brenner continued. “You’re both so... so broken.”

Hopper clenched his jaw.

“You’re going to give us what we need. We’re going to get her son back, and then it’ll be like none of this ever happened.”

Brenner sat down in his chair at that. “You want to go where the boy is?”

“Yes,” Hopper said evenly.

“Why?” Brenner couldn’t help himself but to ask. “What is this child to you? You could have just let all of this go. You could have walked away with your life. We even gave you a body. All you had to do was move on. But you just had to keep investigating. Now, you’re here for some kid that should mean nothing to you.”

“What life?” Hopper said sarcastically. “You said it yourself. Nobody would bat an eye if I overdosed.”

“Avoidance,” Brenner tutted. “I asked her a similar question. Why does this policeman care? She at least answered that.”

“What? What did she say?” Hopper’s curiosity got the best of him.

“He’s a good man, she said. He would do this for anyone,” Brenner explained. “Is that true? Would you do this for anyone?”

The fact that Joyce believed that made him feel a flash of warmth. After everything, she thought he was a good guy. After everything that had happened between them, after how awful he had become. She still believed in him. She never gave up on him. Perhaps that was exactly the reason why he never gave up on her kid. He knew what it was like to lose a kid, and he wouldn’t wish that on anyone, but there was some part of him that refused to give up on Joyce specifically.

“What do you think?” Hopper glared at him.

Brenner watched him for a moment.

"I'll give you the suits. You can go and try and find the child," he said, having come to his own conclusion.

Hopper exhaled in relief.

Connie opened her mouth to protest, but suddenly thought better than to question her superior.

"But if you survive, I'll have to ensure that you won't tell others about what you know. You all simply know too much. I can't have that risk without you being in some kind of debt to me."

"Yeah, okay," Hopper said. "I'll do whatever you want."

He would do anything to help Joyce get Will back.

Brenner smiled at this. "Then let's not wait any longer. I'll take you to Joyce Byers and you can *attempt* to rescue her son."

32. Chapter 32

Summary for the Chapter:

High School Jopper !

It was one o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. The sky was filled with so many clouds that it was hard to see the faint blue sky behind it. The air was brisk, not quite cold enough to form ice, but uncomfortable enough that you didn't want to be outside for long. Fortunately, Hopper and Joyce weren't stuck outside. Unfortunately, the teenage duo instead found themselves sitting in the Principal's office.

Mr. Cooper caught them smoking outside again. The two had been so engrossed in their conversation that they hadn't heard him approaching. His hands were coming down on their shoulders before they could run away and he was dragging them to discipline with a disgustingly satisfied grin stretched across his face.

It wasn't Joyce's first time getting in trouble, and it certainly wouldn't be her last.

She and Jim Hopper had been smoking cigarettes together all year and they hadn't officially been caught until now. Quite frankly, she didn't care if she got caught. If she got sent home, it was just one less day she had to be stuck at Hawkins High School.

Although Hopper had a reputation for being a troublemaker, he certainly didn't get into much trouble at school. He was considered an all around good kid. Maybe a bit misguided every now and then, but he had a good head on his shoulders and many teachers spoke of how they thought he could actually do something with his life.

Joyce had a very different reputation.

Despite this, they had grown quite close over the past few months and Joyce was starting to notice Hopper reaching out to her more and more. They had always been casual friends, but something about this felt like it wasn't just friendly anymore. The teasing. The

compliments. The long looks. She was wondering how much longer their relationship would remain platonic. It seemed to be headed in a very non platonic direction, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

He was cute, though.

Very Cute.

But could they really last? He had all these dreams of moving to a big city and becoming a cop, and what did she have?

Joyce was glancing at the various paperwork scattered across Principal Jameson's desk, her mind scurrying with possibilities of their future together. She almost didn't notice the nervous bouncing of Hopper's leg.

"You good?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

It wasn't like him to lose his cool over something like this.

"My old man's going to kill me," he shook his head. "I can't get a call home. He'll be so pissed."

Joyce frowned at how freaked out he seemed. She supposed it's because he never usually got caught doing anything bad, even though he had probably done things even worse than her. He was the kind of guy who could smooth talk his way out of trouble, and he always seemed to be at the right place at the right time. She wasn't always as lucky.

Joyce was curious about his lack of usual confidence, but didn't get the chance to ask him why he looked so unnerved because principle Jameson walked in, stepping to his desk with great purpose.

"Well, well, if it isn't Joyce Horowitz," he said dryly. He glanced over and saw Hopper sitting next to her, his eyes widening slightly. "And James Hopper! Getting caught up in something like this! What were you two thinking? Smoking on school property... Mr. Cooper has told me all about it and I must say that I'm very disappointed in you."

"I'm sorry," Hopper said. "We shouldn't have been smoking on school

property. I take full responsibility for this.”

Joyce turned and looked at him like he had grown a second head. He was taking the fall for her? Why would he do that? Didn't he just say his dad would be furious?

“I see,” Principal Jameson said. He opened a drawer and pulled out a phone-book. “Naturally, this behavior isn't tolerated. I can let you off with a warning, so you won't be sent home for the day. But, I will have to call your parents.”

“Wait!” Joyce cut in. “Hop is just taking up for me. He knows my record is in bad shape and he's just being a nice guy. The cigarettes were mine. He wasn't even smoking them.”

The two of them were looking at her with astonishment.

“James, is this true?” the principal asked.

Hopper looked over at her and shook his head. “Technically, they were her cigarettes, but I was-”

“He wasn't smoking them.” Joyce cut him off. “It was me.”

“Mr. Cooper brought in two cigarettes as ‘evidence,’” Principal Jameson said suspiciously.

“What can I say? I have a real problem,” Joyce said quickly. “Just let him go. He didn't do anything wrong.”

“Very well. If what Joyce says is true, I see no reason to call your family, James,” Principal Jameson said seriously.

Hopper looked on with mild shock and Joyce watched him with anticipation.

“Uh,” he said, and it was clear that he didn't approve of Joyce taking the fall, but he was so thrown off by her standing up for him that his mind was clogged up by thoughts of shock and admiration.

Joyce watched as Principle Jameson escorted Hopper away, her friend finally snapping out of his daze and beginning to protest, but

he was too late. She felt a small shrivel of satisfaction knowing that she saved him from whatever he seemed to be so worried about. However, that feeling shrank away when the Principle returned alone, his face full of distaste.

He sat down at his desk and yanked open his filing cabinet, strumming his fingers until he plucked out her file. He opened it, humming with displeasure.

“This is getting to be a bit old, Joyce,” he sighed. “You’re getting suspended for the day, as I’m sure you already knew, given your record. I’ll call home and-”

“You know they won’t answer,” Joyce said.

“It’s a formality,” he said and she thought she saw a flash of pity in his eyes.

Joyce shrugged and waited for him to do what he had to do. After he called, and her parents didn’t answer, he wrote everything down and went to hand her a piece of paper with all the details for her to give to her family. As he held it out to for her to grab, he met her eyes and didn’t release it.

“I know you were lying for him.” he said. “Let me give you a piece of advice, Ms. Horowitz. Don’t make excuses for the men in your life. Not everyone is worth it.”

Joyce ripped the paper from him.

“Sure,” she shrugged.

She left the room, not knowing that maybe she should have taken his advice a bit more seriously.

Notes for the Chapter:

So I actually usually don't like fics about them during high school. I don't know why, I just prefer them set during the time frame of the show. However, I got

this idea and I know pretty much everyone else likes the whole Jopper high school thing, so I DID IT FOR Y'ALL LOL. As always, I hope you enjoyed

33. Chapter 33

It was raining.

Sheets of water were falling from a morbidly grey sky. Rumbles of thunder were erratic with tumultuous booms. The curtains were drawn shut in the Byer's home, but the cracks of lighting etching across the sky sent flares of white light throughout the room.

Hopper should've been at work. It was the middle of the day, and he knew Flo would probably chew him out later for taking such a long lunch break. But he couldn't be bothered with such worries at the moment. He was finally with Joyce, and he was happiest he had felt in a long time. She had the day off from Melvald's, and the thought of her home alone during a storm was far too tantalizing to pass up.

The two of them had officially been together for a week, but they hadn't had very much time alone. Just when he thought they could have some privacy, the kids would pop up with something.

Now, as he lay on top of her on the couch, his lips moving fiercely against hers, he wasn't worried about the kids interrupting them at all. They were far away at their school, and this was the only thing that mattered to him right now. Joyce's lips were unbelievably soft and he felt entirely selfish with how badly he wanted this. He felt her hand running up his back, her breath hitching slightly as he moved against her.

Hopper's hands slid up her shirt, and he felt her smile against his lips, and he was pretty sure this was what heaven felt like. As he slid his hand up, the smooth span of skin suddenly had a section that didn't quite feel right. Hopper knew all too well what it was. The raised line is something his own body has, the war leaving him with many of his own.

It's a scar.

And a pretty bad one.

His mind was flooded with violence, and he knew there was only one

way Joyce could have a scar like that. The expression must have been clearly written on his face, because Joyce was looking up at him curiously. He could tell she was trying to collect herself after him bringing their make out session to an abrupt halt, her chest heaving as she watched him. If he wasn't so tense, he would have felt immense satisfaction with how turned on she seemed to be.

"Did he do this?" Hopper asked, and he tightened his hold on her.

"What?" she asked as her nose scrunched up slightly with concern.

He traces his hand across the large scar spanning across her stomach. He closed his eyes as he imagined what the actual fuck Lonnie must have done to cause this. He has no idea how he could've done something like this and gotten away with it..

Joyce told Hopper that most of Lonnie's abuse was verbal. He never got physical, unless he was super drunk, and even then, the worst he had done were a few bruises and cut lips. She had never mentioned *this*. No, this was way out of any realm or kind of thing Hopper could have ever imagined.

Joyce glanced down at his hand, and he watched as she took her own hand and placed it gently on his.

"Lonnie didn't do this," she smiled at him, and it looked like she was about to laugh.

"Who did?" Hopper didn't understand.

Why would she find this funny? Someone had clearly hurt her. He couldn't comprehend how this could have happened and how he was just now finding out about it. He had known Joyce his whole life and the only guy she hung around who he thought was even remotely capable was Lonnie.

He gazed down at the scar and couldn't help but feel another flash of rage. Was there another man in her life who had hurt her? Hopper couldn't stand the thought of that. She definitely would've had to go to the hospital for something like this. This wasn't something she could have just ignored. Her scar looked like it had been a deep

wound, and he wasn't an expert, but something of this magnitude would have definitely needed some kind of stitches.

"Will," Joyce said.

Hopper blinked. "Huh?"

Joyce started giggling and he couldn't wrap his head around any of this.

"What do you mean Will did that?" he asked her.

"Hop," Joyce shook her head. "I had to have a cesarean."

"Oh," he said. He suddenly felt really stupid for not putting that together.

"It was a really difficult pregnancy," she continued. "This sounds weird, considering what the kids call that place. But, Will was going to come out feet first, and it was putting him at risk for suffocating. The doctor told me it was the only option."

"He was upside down?" Hopper's eyes widened, his mind briefly flashing to the sight of Will in the actual Upside Down.

"I hadn't really put it together until now," she frowned, and he noticed her eyes look down. "Does it bother you?"

Hopper stared at her.

"The scar," she clarified, thinking he didn't understand. "If you don't like it I can just keep the shirt on and-"

Hopper cut her off by pressing his lips to her.

"You're gorgeous," he told her. "The scar isn't a turn off. Not at all. God, nothing about you could ever be a turn off. And you're definitely not keeping that shirt on."

"Oh," she breathed out.

"I just thought- I let my imagination get carried away."

While Hopper hated to see any kind of mark on Joyce, this scar was a reminder of how she would do anything for her children, and that was one of the things Hopper loved most about her. It was strange how a mark had made him blind with rage only moments ago, and now he thought it was almost a symbol of how amazing of a mother she was.

“Hmm,” she hummed, catching his attention. “My imagination was also getting carried away. But it involved a lot less of this, and a lot more of *this* .”

She thrust her hips up and gave him a seductive smile.

Hopper groaned, his previous thoughts forgotten. He captured her lips again, his hand trailing delicately over her scar as moved to take off her shirt. “Well, let’s see how creative your imagination really is.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize for any medical inaccuracies. I am not an expert in that field.

34. Chapter 34

Notes for the Chapter:

hello my wonderful jopper peeps! This next one shot is going to be a multi chap thing. I'm thinking maybe two or three parts. Just an FYI... Hope you enjoy!

Hopper sat in the recliner, his eyes glued to the television. He was munching on some chips while Eleven and Will sat on the couch. Eleven was intently watching the show with him, but Will was barely paying attention. He was drawing on some sketch paper that Jonathan had got him for his birthday last month. Hopper was actually surprised the kid still had any of it left. Every time he saw Will, he was drawing some type of magical scenario or something.

As he watched the two undercover detectives on the television, he faintly heard the phone ringing. It was on the third ring that he absently shouted for Joyce.

“Joyce! Phone!”

He could hear her annoyance from the kitchen as she set a pan down with a bit too much force, but he couldn’t bring himself to look in that direction.

“It’s fine! Not like I’m doing anything!” she yelled out to the three of them.

Hopper continued to watch the show, far too engrossed with it to worry about Joyce’s irritation. The kids also seemed to tune it out. He had been waiting for this episode all week, and it certainly was meeting his expectations. He usually didn’t get too invested in shows. However, this show was special to him. It was the show that he and El had been watching together since she started living with him. It was their show, and he was beyond happy that she still loved watching it as much as him.

He couldn’t imagine being a teenager and wanting to watch a show with his dad. That would have been far too lame for him. Hopper

tried not to think about all the trouble he had been up to at El's age, and found comfort in how lucky he was to have such a good kid. Two really good kids, he reminded himself, glancing over at Will.

Hopper continued watching the show, his bag of chips growing considerably lighter. A commercial cut the show off and he knew the episode would probably be ending after this break. He was beginning to feel a bit sleepy. He rolled up the bag of chips and pushed himself out of the chair. He made his way to the kitchen, surprised to see the light was still on.

"Babe?" he said, seeing Joyce still standing by the phone.

She was still talking? It had been a while since he heard the phone ring. Plus, it was really late to make a phone call, come to think of it. Who could she even still be talking to? He watched as Joyce held up a finger to him and turned her back to him.

His first thought was Karen. That woman could talk for hours. It had been a while since she called, so that might make sense. But, that thought was washed away as he noticed Joyce was nervously wringing the cord of the phone.

"I don't think Jonathan will come," she said lowly. "And I don't know if Will...yes, I did. No, I don't think he should come either."

Hopper set the bag of chips on the counter and came up behind her. He placed his hand delicately on her side and she flinched. He noticed that she didn't turn to meet his gaze, keeping her eyes on the phone cord she was fumbling with.

"Like I said, I haven't spoken to him in months," she sighed. "I- if you haven't heard from him, I can drive over and see."

Hopper curled his hand around her waist. He knew who she was talking about, and he definitely didn't want her driving over to his house. Had Joyce ever even been to Lonnie's house? He had no idea. She hadn't been as long as he had been involved in her life again, and he wasn't exactly supportive of the idea. It was no secret that he hated her ex husband.

Who would want her to get in contact with Lonnie? And why?

“When was the last time they even spoke?” Joyce asked. “They weren’t speaking when we got divorced. Oh. Yeah? Well that’s not surprising.”

There was a pause.

“Evelyn, I’ll be there. Okay?” she nodded. “I know. I’ll give you a call before I come. Alright? Yes, I’ll see you then.”

Hopper was staring intently at Joyce as she put the phone up.

He hadn’t heard the woman’s name in years...

“Evelyn Byers?” he asked. “What does Lonnie’s mom want?”

“She called to tell me that Charles is dead,” she said flatly. “And typical Lonnie won’t answer the phone, and the funeral is in three days.”

Hopper blinked.

Lonnie’s dad was dead.

“You’re divorced,” he said as she turned to face him finally.

Joyce narrowed her eyes at him. “Yes? And I’m married to you now. I told Evelyn this. It’s not like that’s some secret?”

“Okay but-”

“But nothing, Jim,” she said, sensing where he was going. “Like it or not, those are my children’s grandparents.”

Hopper sighed. “I know that. But Charlie Byers was a dickhead.”

Joyce moved past him, and he immediately followed her.

“Don’t you have a show to watch?” she made her way down the hallway to their bedroom, mildly aware that they had caught the attention of the kids.

"The show doesn't matter right now," he argued.

Joyce gave him a look. "It certainly mattered when I was cleaning the kitchen. I swear, the three of you never help out and-

"You can't go," he said, knowing she would steer them off topic if he let her.

She looked at him like he had grown a second head. "Excuse me? Since when did you become my keeper?"

She shut the door to the room a little harsher than she intended, and she glared up at him.

"You said yourself that Jonathan and Will won't go," he rationalized. "If the kids aren't going, then why do you have to?"

"Well I won't force them to go if they don't want to. That's their decision. I just wanted Evelyn to know that I wasn't making them come. *I don't make people do things.*"

"Don't make me the bad guy here, Joyce," he crossed his arms.

Joyce moved past him once again to go to the closet and began rummaging around.

"What are you doing?" Hopper asked.

She ignored him.

"Joyce..." he leaned against the frame.

"I know that he was an asshole," she glared up at him, and he was surprised to see her eyes shining with tears. "I'm not going for him. I'm not going for Lonnie. I happen to like Evelyn, and I know that-

Joyce stopped talked, her voice shaking too much.

"Fine," he grumbled. "But you aren't doing it alone."

She shook her head. "Yes, I am. I already told Evelyn you aren't coming."

“That’s ridiculous!”

“No, it’s not. If Lonnie actually shows up, I don’t need the two of you fighting at his dad’s funeral.”

Hopper watched as she found the black dress she was looking for and she made her way back out of the closet.

“I won’t fight with him,” he followed after her. “Just, let me be there for you.”

Joyce placed the dress on the bed and looked up at him.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I won’t do anything,” he told her seriously. “This is important to you.”

She frowned. “I just...You know how stupid Lonnie can be, and his brother can be even worse with his jokes. Evelyn is having to do this all alone, and I don’t want to go and just make things worse.”

Hopper watched as she sat down on the bed and she pulled her hands to her face. He came to sit down next to her, the bed creaking under their combined weight.

“Hey,” he said softly, pulling her hands away from her face. “It’s okay.”

Her eyes met his, and he hated to see her so sad. She gave a resigned sigh. “I really don’t want to go. But, I can’t help but think...this could’ve have been me.”

Hopper held her hands in his. He couldn’t blame her for making the comparison. Joyce had a tendency to let her anxiety take her to dangerous places in her mind, and this idea wasn’t too far fetched. Still, it was completely wrong.

“That’s not true. Even if you had stayed, your boys aren’t anything like Lonnie and Ray. They wouldn’t have left you to deal with everything.”

“Yeah,” she agreed slowly.

“Besides, you have me now. You won’t have to deal with anything alone,” he said. “And knowing my shitty luck, you’ll die first.”

Joyce’s eyes widened and she hit him in the chest. “Hop! Don’t joke about that!”

He gave her a grin and he noticed her fighting off a small smile of her own. He was joking, but deep down, he really did fear she might die first. He wasn’t sure how he would cope with it either. Joyce was his everything. He’d probably become one of those crotchety old men who had no joy in their lives. The poor kids would have to deal with him...

“I’m not really sure what to tell Will,” she said after a few moments. “He never really knew Charles.”

“What about Jonathan?”

“He’ll probably say ‘good riddance,’” she bit her lip. “He hates everything to do with Lonnie and his side of the family.”

“Can’t say I blame him,” Hopper mumbled.

Joyce looked at him. “See? That’s why you can’t go.”

He put his hands up. “Okay, no more Byers Bashing until after the funeral.”

Joyce looked a little unconvinced, but he really meant it.

As long as the other Byers’ were on their best behavior, he would be too.

35. Chapter 35

Summary for the Chapter:

pt 2 of the funeral fic

The wind blew the bottom of her dress, the black fabric rising up her thighs in response, and she fought the urge to shiver. Joyce watched as people gave their condolences to Evelyn. The older woman was giving her appreciation, her own pale skin draped in layer of black. She had her make up done, always a woman concerned with her looks, and she wore her signature cheap pearl earrings. On her shoulder, was the hand of Lonnie, his finger's drumming almost impatiently.

Luckily, Joyce had managed to get Lonnie in contact with Evelyn the day after she had called.

She and Hopper drove out to his house, and she watched with a stone face as Lonnie broke down. He called her a liar, and accused her of many absurd things that didn't exactly make the most sense. But he was hurt, and she knew better than anyone how he liked to lash out when he didn't know how to process his emotions. She told him to call his mom, and then she and Hopper left. She was glad he managed to show up, despite how little she wanted to be in the same place with him.

Jonathan didn't come.

However, Will decided that he wanted to. Joyce wasn't quite sure why he wanted to, but she figured he had his own reasons and he was old enough to decide what he wanted. El also said she would go, but both Joyce and Hopper knew she was just doing it out of the goodness of her heart. In the end, they convinced her that it was certainly okay for her to go spend the day with Max instead.

"How long do we have to stay?" Hopper muttered to her as they stood a few feet away from where the small group of people were gathered.

She had been very nervous to bring him to this, but he was proving true to his word. He hadn't even spoken to Lonnie, which was probably why things had been going smoothly. Hopper had somehow managed to stay glued to her side.

"We need to be respectful," she said. "We can't be the first people to leave."

"Not many people came," Will glanced around.

"Yeah, well nobody really liked-" Hopper started but caught himself. "Uh, nobody really likes funerals. Sometimes it's easier to avoid them."

Will gave him an amused grin.

"Nice save," he mouthed silently to Hopper.

Hopper gave him a wink.

"No, it wasn't," Joyce shook her head at the two of them.

Will gave a shrug. "I thought it was."

Joyce felt the wind give another burst, and this time she couldn't help but to shiver. She felt Hopper take a step closer and placed his arm around her shoulders. She felt the warmth from his body radiating and she glanced up at him.

"It's not normal for someone to be so warm all the time," she leaned into him.

"It's not normal for someone to be so cold all the time," he said back to her.

Will gave them a look of fondness, mixed with a twinge of disgust. Despite being a bit older, he still didn't understand love. It really just wasn't his thing.

"Well, well, well!" the booming voice of Ray Byers caught their attention. "If it isn't Joy Joy!"

Ray Byers was shorter than his younger brother Lonnie, but his personality was large. He favored his father's looks, small dark eyes and curly hair. He had put on quite a bit of weight since Joyce had last seen him, a lot of it unmistakably at his center. He was wearing an old suit, filled with many tattered sections, but he seemed to walk with the confidence of a man who wore a million dollars.

Joyce had many memories with Ray. Most of them were in the beginning of her relationship with Lonnie. He was several years older, but he always came around for the holidays to check in on his baby brother. Like Lonnie, Ray was actually a very personable guy. Fortunately, he lacked the major temper that the other men in his family had. He was often the one trying to find the peace, making light of situations with jokes.

Despite this, Ray wasn't the sharpest knife in the box. He was the type to run away from his problems rather than try and think of a way to try and solve them. It was because of this he never seemed to settle down. Joyce wasn't sure how many girlfriends she had met of his throughout the years, but she could already think of six by name. She also knew he never seemed able to hold down a job. He seemed to be the type that went wherever the wind took him.

He came up, throwing open his arms to give Joyce a hug. She awkwardly stepped away from Hopper, returning his embrace.

"Hi, Ray," she said. "I'm really sorry about your father."

"Oh, yes," he nodded, seeming not at all bothered with the fact they had place his dad in the ground only moment ago, his demeanor as cheerful as ever. "Mom is taking it hard, but I'm sure she'll manage. She always does."

He turned to see Will.

"You must be Bill? My little tiny nephew!" he moved to give Will a hug. "Ah, it's been years. Last time I saw you, you must have only been a few years old."

"It's Will," Will stood like a board, watching with sheer apprehension as the man pulled away.

"Is it?" Ray laughed. "When you get as old as me, it's so easy to forget things. I'm sure your mother knows!"

Joyce dropped her mouth open, then quickly shut it by biting her lip. She wanted to tell Ray that he had technically only met Jonathan, as she had been pregnant with Will the last time she saw him, but she decided against the fact. It would only end up making it even more weird.

"Ray," Hopper cleared his throat, both as a warning and greeting.

The man's laughter stopped, but he still had a small smile.

"Hopper," he said, extending his hand. "Surprised to see you! When I heard you married Lonnie's girl, I was howling for three days straight!"

Hopper didn't laugh. He didn't even smile. He did, however, shake Ray's hand.

"You still Chief?" Ray asked, eyeing him.

"Yup," Hopper said.

"If you'd have told me little Jimmy Hopper would've been Chief of Police one day, I never would've believed it," he said. "Course, the town sure has changed since I left. Hardly the same Hawkins we grew up in, you know?"

"Yup," Hopper repeated.

Joyce sent him a mild glare for being so short.

Ray gave a small chuckle to fill the silence that followed. He brought his hand up to the back of his neck and glanced over at his mother, who was speaking quietly to Lonnie.

"Hey Joyce?" he said, letting out a sigh. "Thanks for getting a hold of Lonnie. I didn't think the bastard was going to show up."

She nodded. "Oh, well, I knew Lonnie would want to be here. He's just stubborn at times."

“Stubborn is putting it nicely,” Ray said. “Guy can be a real prick about things. Of course, you know as good as anyone. You got balls, though. I always told Lonnie you two wouldn’t work out. You got too much fire for him.”

Joyce gave him a half smile. She glanced over at Hopper, but he didn’t meet her gaze.

“Dad never shut up about you,” Ray reminisced. “You remember how you always used to kick our asses at poker?”

“Every Christmas,” Joyce nodded, an actual smile forming on her lips.

Ray laughed and looked over at Will. “It pissed your grandpa off so much. To lose to a girl! He accused her of cheating, and he always used to tell us, ‘that woman can’t be trusted. Any person with a poker face that good can’t be trusted.’”

“You played poker?” Will asked, quirkling a brow.

“She could’ve played professionally!” Ray said. “Probably could’ve won back all that money Lonnie lost! He was always shit at poker.”

“I wasn’t that good,” Joyce said. “You were all just too predictable.”

Ray shrugged. “Even so. It made my old man so mad. Too bad he and Lonnie had that falling out, and then you got divorced. I think I could give you a run these days, Joy Joy.”

Joyce glanced down. “Have you talked to him about that? I’m sure he isn’t happy they never made up.”

“Lonnie never talks about feelings,” Ray dismissed the idea. “Besides, the past is the past. I wasn’t involved in all that. If Lonnie wants to stay mad over money, that’s on him.”

“What happened?” Will asked curiously, looking between the three adults.

Ray let out a loud chuckle. “Your father never mentioned it? I’m surprised. He never shuts up about it when I talk to him.”

“Will, sweetie, it’s nothing we should be talking about now. I actually shouldn’t have brought it up at all,” Joyce said, frowning.

“Ah, but you should’ve!” Ray bellowed, not at all concerned about the volume of his voice. “The first words out of that jackasses mouth when he got here was about money. Does he care about anything else?”

“Alcohol?” Hopper suggested lowly.

Ray gave him a look, and began laughing. “Damn right!”

“He cares about baseball,” Will added, crossing his arms.

“That he does,” Ray nodded. “Oddly enough, baseball was the downfall of dad’s relationship with Lonnie. All you need to know is never seriously gamble with your family.”

Will nodded, sending a glance to Joyce and Hopper, who remained quiet.

“Well, anyways,” Ray said, breaking the silence. “Guess I’ll see you at the next funeral? Unless, of course, you want to take me up on that poker offer?”

Joyce shook her head.

“My days of poker are long over.”

He nodded, and waved goodbye to them as he made his way to the next group of people, clearly not thinking about the weight of his words. The next funeral would likely be his mother’s and Joyce fervently hoped that wouldn’t happen for a while.

Joyce was always amazed by how peculiar Ray was. She glanced over at Hopper and Will, both looking at her expectantly. The two were looking at her with hopeful expressions, and she knew immediately what they wanted.

“Okay, fine,” she said. “We can leave. Just let me say something to Evelyn.”

“And maybe then you can show us your legendary poker skills, oh great poker master?” Hopper suggested, granting her a grin.

“You wish,” she winked at them.

Notes for the Chapter:

Pt 3 is going to have the drama, so get ready for some fun there (:

36. Chapter 36

Summary for the Chapter:

pt 3 !

“Forgot how much of a weirdo Ray was,” Hopper said, staring after Joyce as she made her way to Evelyn.

She approached the older woman carefully, waiting until she was done talking with the older couple in front. Lonnie was no longer standing next to her, having made his way to sulk somewhere else. Joyce gave Evelyn a small smile and accepted her hug. Evelyn held onto her for a long moment, and Hopper could tell they were speaking quietly to each other.

“I kinda liked him,” Will said, causing him to turn and look at him. “He’s really different than my dad.”

“Yeah?” Hopper scratched his head. “He really is.”

“Speaking of which...” Will trailed off, fidgeting with his hands. “I- I was wanting to go speak with my dad.”

Hopper looked at him.

Will stammered on nervously. “I know you don’t get along, but I didn’t want to make mom have to talk to him. And, well...Will you walk over with me?”

Will stared up at him with wide eyes, his hands still wringing the bottom of his shirt in apprehension.

“Yeah, I will,” Hopper nodded at him.

Will gave him a smile, and Hopper was reminded very clearly how much Will took after his mother. He didn’t look any of Lonnie’s relatives here, and something about that made Hopper happier than it should have.

Hopper let Will lead the way, wanting to offer his support, but in no

hurry to speak to Lonnie himself. However, if it meant Joyce having to avoid a conversation with Lonnie, he was all for taking that bullet. Plus, Will appeared rather eager about it.

Will seemed to know exactly where Lonnie had wandered off to. He approached a tree that was slightly off to the side of the crowd, and his father was leaning against it, a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

“Dad!” Will called out to him, and Hopper noted the small amount of hope that seemed to fill his voice.

“Hey Will,” Lonnie said, glanced over at the sound of his name. “Thanks for being here.”

“Yeah,” Will said.

He came up to the tree and looked at Lonnie. Lonnie was dressed a bit nicer than his brother, but his face was filled with notable stubble. He sent a look towards Hopper, but didn’t hold his gaze. He drew his attention to his cigarette.

“I noticed Jonathan didn’t come.”

“He didn’t want to,” Will frowned.

Lonnie nodded. Usually he might have put up some kind of jab, but he seemed rather resigned about it. “Guess your funeral was enough.”

Will shifted awkwardly at that.

It was painfully obvious that Will was hoping to have some kind of conversation with his dad. Hopper supposed it was only natural for a kid to want to have some kind of relationship with their parent, even if that parent was a complete ass.

“I met your brother,” Will continued, trying to steer the conversation. “He was really interesting.”

Lonnie gave him a look. “He’s an idiot.”

“Oh, yeah...” Will said, kicking his shoe in the dirt. “Do you have any fun stories with him?”

"Nope," Lonnie said, exhaling some smoke.

Hopper clenched his jaw, trying his hardest to bite his tongue.

"He told me you guys used to play poker," Will said.

Lonnie gave a small smile at that. "Yeah, yeah we did. Used to be a family tradition of sorts."

"A family tradition? Well...maybe we could play sometime? You could teach me!"

"Will..." Lonnie looked at him with a grim expression. "I doubt I'd have time for that."

Will frowned, but nodded his head. "I just thought since it was something you liked, maybe we could-"

"I'm just super busy with Cynthia, you know?" Lonnie said.

Hopper couldn't hold it in anymore. He couldn't just stand there and let Lonnie talk to Will like that. Like he wasn't even his kid. Like Will was just some random person who wasn't worth his time. Like he had anything better to do...

"I noticed Cynthia didn't come," Hopper stated calmly, causing both of them to look at him.

Lonnie tossed his cigarette onto the ground. "She's sick."

"Well then I guess you should have time to play poker with your *son*." Hopper said, glaring at him.

Lonnie jutted his head towards him.

"Damn, seems like Joyce has you whipped pretty good," he sneered. "Wanna turn around? I want to check and see if she's got her hand up your ass. Seems like she's speaking for you like some kind of puppet."

Will stepped away from his dad, looking up at Hopper with defeat clearly written on his face. "Let's just go."

Hopper clenched his fist, nodding. He wasn't going to start anything. He promised Joyce he wouldn't do anything stupid. He could just walk away and let Lonnie continue to be the dead beat that he was. All he had to do was keep walking...

"You had some nerve showing up!" Lonnie called out to him as Will began to lead them away. "Wanting to flaunt Joyce on your arm at my dad's funeral? That's low, even for you!"

Hopper continued to walk, following Will back over to where Joyce was.

"Go ahead! Walk away! You can have all of them! I don't want a gay son or his slut of a mother!"

Will stopped.

Hopper stopped.

"What the *fuck* did you just say?" Hopper stayed frozen to his spot.

Lonnie stood up a bit straighter. "You heard me. I guess a pill swallowing cop is the best they can get."

Will flinched.

Hopper spun around, and before Lonnie could even blink, he was pinned up against the tree.

"The only reason you're still breathing right now is because of the woman you just called a slut," Hopper hissed.

Lonnie choked against the force of Hopper's hand against him.

"And Will deserves so much better than you. Who gives a shit if he's gay or not? He's still more man than you'll ever be."

"Hopper!" Will said, putting his hand on him. "People are going to see us!"

He pressed a little harder into Lonnie.

“Sorry your dad died, asshole,” he shoved the man to the side, watching him fall and gasp for air.

Will immediately tugged on Hopper, and he stepped away from Lonnie. Will briskly led them away and back into the crowd, and Hopper’s adrenaline was pumping. He looked down at Will and saw the boy looking at him with a shocked expression.

“Shit,” Hopper said. “I shouldn’t have done that. You wanted to talk to him. I should have-”

He was cut off by the feeling of Will throwing his arms around him for a hug.

“Thank you,” he said, and Hopper did his best to return the embrace.

He wasn’t always one for physical contact, but this felt welcomed.

“I’m so stupid,” Will muttered. “Jonathan has told me a thousand times that I’m getting my hopes up for something that’ll never happen.”

“You’re not stupid,” he said. “Lonnie’s the stupid one. He has no idea what he gave up.”

Hopper really meant it, too. Everything Lonnie had tossed away had become Hopper’s entire world.

Will considered these words.

After a moment, he nodded in agreement and began pulling away. “I’m glad he’s stupid.”

“You are? Why?”

“Because it gave me another dad. A *good* dad.”

Hopper smiled at him. He really didn’t do the feelings thing, but if anyone could make him, it was definitely Joyce and their kids.

“Me too, kid.” He said. “I’m really proud to think of you as my own.”

Will beamed.

“Now, do me a favor and don’t tell your mom what just happened. I’m supposed to be on my best behavior.”

“Tell mom what?” Will gave him a look filled with mischief.

Hopper smiled, ruffling his hair as he backed away. “Save that look for poker. If your mom’s as good as Ray says, we’ll be needing all the help we can get once I teach you how to play.”

Notes for the Chapter:

It felt good to write a pure Will and Hopper moment. I feel like their relationship is really important, especially to Joyce. Anyways, the next chapter will put us back to totally random one-shots again. I have no idea how many more of these I'm going to write. I never thought I'd write this many, but here we are... I guess as long as you guys are still enjoying them, I'll be posting LOL

37. Chapter 37

Hopper was outside of the house, a thick layer of sweat making his shirt become heavier as it soaked up the beads of liquid. He was bent over Jonathan's car and he was trying his hardest to figure out why the hell it won't work. Despite Joyce insisting she could hire someone to fix it, Hopper told her that he was doing it.

He might not be a mechanic, but how hard could it be?

At least, that's what he thought two hours ago.

Now he was hot and ready for this shit to be over with. He would have already called someone by now if it had just been him, but he was trying to prove a point to Joyce. Especially after he technically almost blew her up last summer in the woods with Alexei.

"How's it looking?" Jonathan asked, wiping away his own sweat.

He'd been outside the whole time trying to help as much as he can. He was handy, but he certainly didn't seem to know what he was doing anymore than Hopper. He had fixed up a few things over the years since money was always tight, but he'd been fortunate enough to never have significant car trouble until now.

"I think I got it," he grunted, glancing over everything. "Go try and start her up."

Jonathan nodded. He went over and opened the door and sat down, turning the keys to start the engine.

"Fingers crossed it won't blow up," he joked.

Hopper glared at him. His eyes were already squinting from the harshness of the sun beating down on them, but the glare was still obvious to Jonathan. Hopper stepped back from the car and watched.

Jonathan turned the key, and the sound of the engine started to grow, and Hopper thought they had finally done it, when all of the sudden the car continued to do what it did when they first began

looking at it.

It simply wouldn't start.

"Son of a bitch!" Hopper shouted in frustration.

Jonathan turned the key and gave a sigh. "Want to just call it a day?"

"No! I want to fix this god damn car! It shouldn't be this hard!"

"Can we at least take a break or something?"

"You can go wait inside," Hopper grumbled. "I'm going to figure this damn car out!"

Jonathan sighed. "At this point I'm thinking it's going to take more than just messing around with the battery terminals."

Hopper gave out another frustrated sigh, knowing he was right. They had pretty much tried every amateur trick in the book. He was starting to think it was something much bigger, and Jonathan voicing it out-loud only seemed to confirm his fear.

"Maybe we can try-" Hopper started to suggest when the sound of Joyce screaming from inside the house ripped through the air.

"Jonathan! Help!"

Hopper dropped whatever tool he had been holding, and ran towards the house. He felt Jonathan on his heels. The worst possible scenarios were going through his mind, and he had spiraled so out of control he was half expecting Martin fucking Brenner to be standing in the kitchen.

Instead, he was met with the sight of Joyce standing there with a broom in her hand and a mortified expression on her face.

She spun around and saw them, immediately jutting her finger out towards the pantry.

"There's a spider!" she cried out.

Hopper blinked in disbelief.

“Why are you just standing there?” she looked between them frantically. “Kill it!”

Hopper looked over at Jonathan, and he wasn’t sure if it was the heat exhaustion or the absurdity of Joyce panicking over a spider, or most likely a combination of both, but he couldn’t help but to laugh. It wasn’t a casual laugh either. It was a laugh that vibrated throughout his body and echoed in in the house. He heard Jonathan give a small chuckle next to him.

“Are you *laughing*?” Joyce asked in disbelief. “This isn’t funny!”

Jonathan covered his mouth with his hand. “S-sorry, mom. It’s just been awhile. I forgot how afraid of spiders you were.”

Hopper continued to laugh, the intense look Joyce gave him not stopping his amusement. “I had no idea you were afraid of spiders.”

“Oh, she’s always been terrified,” Jonathan said. “I just thought maybe after everything...”

“Joyce, you’ve been to another dimension and you’re afraid of a tiny spider?” Hopper wondered.

“It has so many legs!” Joyce argued, glancing nervously to where the spider must have been lingering.

The two men continued to laugh, sharing amused glances.

“Ha ha,” she said dryly. “I’m glad you both think this is just so comical. How’s the car going, by the way?”

She batted her eyes up at them as the two of them suddenly fell very silent.

“We’re almost done,” Hopper said. “Only reason we stopped was because of you screaming your head off in here.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “I definitely haven’t heard any of your very loud expletives. It must be going great.”

"I'll leave the spider in here," he taunted, smiling as her eyes grew wide.

"Actually, I have a better idea," Jonathan cut in. "How about we kill the spider, and mom calls a real mechanic?"

"Please," Joyce nodded. .

Hopper wanted to protest, but he was tired and something about seeing Joyce be that silly over a spider had lightened his mood considerably.

"I can't believe I didn't know you were afraid of spiders," Hopper said, watching as Jonathan advanced over to the pantry with his shoe.

"It's not something I like to think about," she shivered.

"I think it's cute."

"Oh? I think it's cute you think you can fix that car," she stuck her tongue out at him playfully.

"That's big talk for someone who screamed over a spider."

She bit her lip.

"You do realize you're drenched?" she ran her eyes over him. "I can see through your shirt."

"Like the view?" he joked, lifting his arm to flex slightly.

Whack!

They both looked over to where Jonathan had slammed his shoe down.

"Did you get it?" Joyce asked him.

Jonathan looked at them seriously.

"Yes. So, stop flirting before I throw up and go call that mechanic."

38. Chapter 38

“I’m done here,” Joyce hissed, slamming the lab door shut behind her.

They had been talking with Dr. Sam Owens for most of the day, and despite everything, he and his useless coworkers were still no closer to figuring out anything with her son. Joyce had just worked a double shift at Melvald’s and was feeling a bit sleep deprived already. She and Jonathan had a small disagreement that morning over money, which had left her feeling both furious and guilty most of the day for snapping at him. Now these doctors were telling her that they still didn’t know how to help Will even though they had been coming to see them consistently for months.

She was beyond frustrated with this day.

“What do you mean? You can’t be done,” Hopper said, following after her. “This is the only place that can help Will.”

Hopper was having a hell of a day himself. Between the completely ridiculous police work, which included an angry business owner and some punk kids, the strain of trying to raise El while also simultaneously keeping her very existence a secret, and now these doctors were just adding the cherry on top. He was frustrated with the lack of progress as well, but he knew they couldn’t just walk away. Where else could they even go? Joyce should know better than anyone that this is the best way to help Will.

“Help him? They haven’t done anything!” she cried out. “They’re just fiddling with their hands telling me I should trust them. Trust them to do what exactly? Will is getting worse! And they aren’t doing anything!”

Hopper watched with pain as her eyes filled with tears. He fought the urge to reach out and wipe them away.

“They’re doing what they can. You know nobody else can help him.”

It was that simple. Nobody else could even fathom the events they

went through. No other facility would understand. They'd probably take one look at all of them and they'd all be locked up and deemed crazy.

Joyce shook her head. "Bob thinks-"

"What the hell does Bob know about this?"

He doesn't mean for it to come out so aggressive, but he couldn't help it. Bob Newby shouldn't know anything about anything relating to this situation. Hopper knew Joyce wouldn't tell Bob, of course, but for some reason, he snapped anyways.

"Bob thinks," she repeated, louder this time, not one to back down so easily. "That Will should go to a specialist in Chicago."

Hopper couldn't help the disgusted look on his face. "What? Joyce, we've been over this. There is nothing regular specialists can do for him."

"How do we know that?" she asked. "Bob said he knew someone that-"

"Bob doesn't know!" Hopper yelled. "I know! I'm telling you Chicago won't do him any good! I was there with you. I know what he went through. You really think listening to someone like Bob will-"

"Don't do that!"

"Do what?"

Joyce glared at him. "Don't insult Bob because you're upset with me."

He sighed. "I'm not upset with you. I just- Chicago isn't the answer."

One moment she was glaring up at him, and he was waiting for her to fire back at him, and the next moment her lip was wobbling. Her tears began to fall more freely and Hopper stood frozen in terror as she began to cry.

"I know it's not the same," she said. "B-but, what would you do if it

was your daughter? What if there was another doctor who might have a chance at helping? Could you just ignore it?"

Hopper was immediately reminded of a painful conversation he had with Diane that felt like a lifetime ago. The doctors had told them there was nothing they could do...

"Then we go to a different doctor," Hopper said, placing his hands on Diane's shoulders.

"You heard what they said. It's no good," she said, and her voice was empty as she shoved his hands away.

"How can we be sure? Maybe- Maybe they know something these doctors don't know and someone else can help!"

Diane shook her head. "I don't want Sara to have to keep changing hospitals and having doctors probe at her until she...If they said we have three months, can't we just do what we can to make those three months as good as possible for her?"

"But-"

"No, Jim. I'm not letting her spend her life as some...lab rat. You know that's all she'll be."

Hopper blinked away the memory, swallowing thickly as he tried to regain his composure. He had wanted to seek outside help, but Diane had known better. He was glad he had listened, because once Sara started to decline, it was rapid.

This situation was a bit different.

Will was sort of like a lab rat already here. They really were just trying tests and nothing seemed to be working. If he really was just experiencing severe PTSD, maybe a fresh perspective could help? They could just change up the stories a bit and maybe it could actually work.

"Hop, I can't keep watching Will suffer like this. I feel so helpless..." Joyce was openly crying now, her eyes wide and apologetic for bringing up something painful for him.

He's never been good when women cry. He can't count how many times he's seen the women in his life cry like this, and he feels so useless. Hopper reaches out for her, and feels a twinge of satisfaction when she doesn't shove him away.

"We're getting him all the help we can," Hopper said soothingly.

"We don't know that," she argued. "What if there is a chance? What if Chicago can help him and I don't take him there? I have to at least try something."

He sighed.

Although he truly thinks it will be a waste of time and money they definitely don't have, he understands.

He understands all too well.

"Okay," he exhaled against her hairline. "Okay, we'll try Chicago."

39. Chapter 39

Summary for the Chapter:

What happens with Joyce and Murray when Hopper goes to BK?

“You can’t be serious!” she shouted. “You’re going to leave me here with them?”

Hopper stopped, leaning against the side of the car. His face was grave and his eyes looked tired. “Yes, just tell me what you want to eat.”

“Hop, I don’t know these guys! What if-”

“Joyce,” he said, his tone serious. “Do you honestly think I would leave you alone with someone I didn’t trust?”

She glanced down. “No.”

“I know Murray seems like a wack job, but he’s harmless.”

“Yeah, you said that and then he pointed a gun in our faces!”

Hopper brought his hands up to his face. “He wouldn’t have shot us.”

“Hop,” she frowns, and she thinks she has him convinced. She sees the slight twitch in his face muscles and he opens his mouth, and she knows he’s going to say she can come. But, just as soon as he starts, he stops, and lets out a small disgruntled noise.

“Joyce. I need you to stay here. Okay? I don’t want Murray alone with Smirnoff. I promise he won’t try anything with you. I don’t want Alexei out of my sight, and I’d feel better if you stayed with him.”

She stared at him.

“Trust me. You’ll be fine.” he repeated. “Now, what do you want from Burger King?”

"I'm not hungry," she said coldly, turning away from him.

"Joyce!" he shouted. "Joyce!"

She shut Murray's door behind her, feeling her anger rise at the sound of the car starting and subsequently leaving, Hopper speeding off. She made her way to the couch and began to sulk, trying her best to make the most of her situation.

She couldn't believe he actually left her.

Joyce crossed her arms with slight discomfort, her eyes drifting over to the faint glow of the time from Murray's oven in the kitchen. Hopper literally just left for Burger King, and yet she felt like she had been waiting there without him for an eternity. The sound of Alexei giggling at the television mixed with Murray's occasional comment in Russian was all that filled her head, and she wondered how the hell she ended up here.

All over a magnet.

She almost wished she had just let the whole thing go. She wished she could have been normal and just picked up her fallen magnets and not thought twice. She shouldn't have gone to Scott Clark's house. No, she should have just gone to Enzo's, and maybe Hopper wouldn't be acting like a total jackass to her right now. They could have had their dinner, and he would've worn that shirt, and they could've gone back to his cabin...and she most certainly wouldn't be stuck in some strange man's living room waiting on him to bring back Burger King and quite possibly the Russian's taking over the world.

"Have a nice chat outside?" Murray asked, and something about the small smirk on his face irritated her to no end.

"No," she said.

"Oh? Trouble in paradise?" he asked, leaning back on the cushion and kicking his feet up.

She glowered at him. "I don't know what Jim told you, but we aren't a couple."

“Jim didn’t tell me anything. He didn’t have to.”

Joyce stared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist,” he rolled his eyes. “You two clearly have chemistry. It’s all too obvious, honestly.”

“We aren’t together,” she said, glancing back at the clock again.

Murray put his hands up. “Okay, okay.”

She sent him a look that told him to drop it.

He either didn’t pick up on it, or simply didn’t care. Joyce got the feeling it was the latter.

“You got into a fight over something,” Murray continued. “It was probably something really silly, but it’s reflecting a larger issue in your lives, which is hurting your relationship.”

“Wow, you really don’t pick up hints, do you?” Joyce said, and for some reason, she can’t help but to laugh. She’s not happy or amused, but the absurdity of everything is catching up to her.

“Well I surmised we can sit here in silence until Hopper gets back and you two can continue your frankly annoying side conversations, which aren’t all that private by the way, given how loud you both are. Or, we can act like adults and talk about what’s bothering you. It’s clear you’re upset.”

Joyce looked at him incredulously, considering his words. She and Hopper weren’t *that* loud. Were they? The expression on Murray’s face was just so smug and she hated to think for a moment that he could be right.

“Fine,” she gave in, hoping it wasn’t against her better judgment. “It’s because of this stupid magnet.”

“Just the magnet?” he questioned, and that word caused Alexei to glance over briefly. “I find it hard to believe this all spiraled out of control because of a magnet. But, then again, it is Jim.”

She fought a smile at the comment. Luckily, her irritation won out and she was able to maintain her expression.

“Yes.”

Murray gave her a look and simply waited.

And waited.

“Er, no,” she looked down. “The magnet is just part of it.”

“Please elaborate,” he moved his hand in a dramatic gesture to show she had the stage.

She sighed. She might as well just get it all out now.

“He-Hop, I mean,” she said. “He’s been asking me out to dinner for some time. And I’ve been saying no, and then I finally said yes, but then the magnet thing happened. After everything that we’ve been through, I just couldn’t let it go. Why was it happening? First at my house and then at the store. It couldn’t just be coincidence, right? So I went to visit Scott Clark, who is quite good with science, and he explained to me why the magnets might be losing their magnetism. I just got so distracted with it all and I just forgot about the dinner.”

She looked to Murray, trying to gauge what he was thinking. Alexei had gone back to enjoying his cartoons, obviously not able to follow the conversation. The other man seemed to be taking it all in, and Joyce’s anxiety forced her to keep talking.

“I feel bad about it. I know I hurt his feelings, but he’s just been acting like a giant ass over the whole thing. He didn’t believe me and now I feel like he’s somehow mad about that, too. I mean, it’s not my fault he didn’t listen to me about the magnets. I know I was wrong and should have least called him about dinner, but now he thinks I apparently have the hots for every man that isn’t him.”

She sat, waiting for Murray to agree. She was expecting him to say, ‘yes, Joyce, you should apologize. Standing a man up without even a phone call? No wonder he’s so pissed off.’

Instead, Murray asked her something she hadn’t been ready for in the

slightest.

“Why did it take you so long to say yes?” he asked.

Joyce looked away.

“You can tell me,” he said, and he sounded so much more serious than she thought possible.

“I just...I was involved with someone else.”

“Jonathan’s dad?” Murray asked.

“Uh, no. I mean, I have my own issues with that, but, no. This man was different and...” she trailed off, and it was too painful for her to continue her train of thought.

“Break ups can be hard,” he offered.

“He died,” she said, staring at the table. “He saved us, and he died at the lab. His name was...Bob Newby.”

Saying his name stirred something deep within her, and she fought the urge to let it consume her.

“Shit,” Murray said. “I-um. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

The panic on his face caught the attention of Alexei. He said something in Russian, but Murray ignored him.

“I guess I said no because I felt like I shouldn’t move on,” she admitted.

“Why?”

“What?” Joyce blinked.

“Why don’t you think you should move on?” he asked. “Because it would be wrong to do to...Bob? Or because you don’t think you deserve happiness?”

Joyce didn’t answer. How could she answer that? She supposed the answer was yes to both, but admitting it out loud just seemed a bit

pathetic. Not to mention, she did just meet Murray.

“Jim doesn’t think he deserves happiness,” Murray said, sensing she might not answer his question.

She bit her lip.

“Sometimes I think he’s so busy protecting everyone else that he forgets to protect himself,” Joyce agreed, her eyes slowly meeting his.

“I think Jim has spent a long time feeling like he can’t protect anybody,” Murray said. “But you’re aware he doesn’t think he deserves happiness, right? I’m pretty sure he knows you feel the same way. I’m not an expert, but maybe he thought this whole magnet thing was you trying to run away from happiness. Something he is all too familiar with.”

Joyce frowned. “I don’t run away from happiness.”

“Then why haven’t you gone out with Hopper?” he asked.

She furrowed her brow.

He had a point.

Before she could respond the sound of Murray’s doorbell ringing signaled.

Murray sprung up and made his way to the door, leaving her with the weight of the conversation sitting on her heart. “Who is it?”

“Open the damn door!” Hopper called out.

“Jim, I have a protocol,” he protested. “State your name and look at the camera.”

“Open. The. Door.” he yelled, his hands tightening around the Burger King bag.

Joyce listened as Murray opened the door and Hopper shoved past him. She tried to shove everything down that had just happened,

which Murray seemed to be doing with little difficulty.

“Did you make sure to get no tomatoes?” Murray followed after him.

“You get what you get,” Hopper said, handing the slushie to Alexei.

He began to dig in the bag and handed Murray his burger. Joyce watched as he dug around some more, handing her a burger as well.

“Thanks,” she said, taking it from him.

He grunted in response, moving to sit down on the couch.

She glanced at the wrapping and noticed that it distinctly said ‘no mustard.’ He really remembered that about her? Even after she was rude and told him not to even get her anything...

Joyce sighed.

Maybe Murray had a point.

They were both running from happiness, and it seemed like the two of them could stop running together.

She couldn’t believe that with everything going on she was thinking about *this* , but her mind seemed to be focusing on only one thing as she took a bite of her burger.

She needed to talk to Hopper about another date.

Notes for the Chapter:

It's officially been one year since I started all these one-shots...Thank you so much for all the support!

40. Chapter 40

It was simple.

His life didn't matter.

He had nothing to live for. Sarah was dead. Diane was gone.

He had screwed his way around the town and still there was nothing for him but an empty bed and a numb feeling in his bones. The black hole had sucked up everything, every aspect of his past and any possible future. That was that. He had accepted it, and he was fine going through life chugging beers and swallowing whatever pills he could find in his pathetic attempt to make it through the day.

It really was cut and dry.

But then Joyce Byers came along, and she had never made anything simple in her whole life.

He hadn't thought much of her when she was sitting in his office. Her eyes had been frenzied, and if anything, he just felt bad for her. She wasn't the same Joyce he had known. That carefree girl he knew from high school couldn't be the broken woman in his office. It seemed the world hadn't been particularly kind to her either. Her kid was missing, and for some reason, Hopper made it about himself.

He was cursed.

That could be the only reason her kid was missing. The only reason why Benny was dead. And the only reason how now that teenage girl was missing, too.

He had been selfish to think that.

He wasn't sure when everything changed.

One moment he was this shallow grave, walking around with any reason. Every laugh was fake and every night was filled with emptiness. Then, out of nowhere, he felt like he had been given a purpose again.

Hopper had no idea when it happened. He remembered the panic, rushing to Joyce's house after he realized his own had been bugged. He could see the sheer and utter relief on her features when he told her that she was right. He could feel the way his heart fluttered when he looked at Joyce outside Terry Ives' house, sitting in his car with the truth of it all slowly unfolding. He remembered how she yelled at him outside the school, refusing to be left behind, and how that stirred something deep within him. If he closed his eyes, he could see how small she looked in that suit, the two of them traveling into the other dimension to find her son. Despite how small she was, he knew nothing would stop her, and he was in awe.

He isn't sure when it changed, but the first night he found his lips against another woman, he wanted it to be Joyce. He tried to convince himself that it was just a physical attraction and that he would get over it, but no matter how many women he kissed, his mind fantasized about her. He knew her lips would be soft. He had kissed her only three times in high school, but he still remembered the way she felt against him.

It was worse than just desiring physical intimacy. Even after he felt dead, he was still human, and he had urges and needs. What was new was the incessant need to be around her. He liked to hear her laugh, to see her brow furrow while she concentrated. He liked eating lunch with her and simply hearing about her day.

His whole life had been ripped from him and he lacked any inclination to care about anything. Even himself. What was the point? And yet, somehow Joyce made him feel alive again.

So the drinking slowly stopped. The pills were dumped in the trash. He had even taken Flo's advice and was eating healthier.

For the first time in a long time, he felt like he deserved happiness.

As he began to spend more time with Joyce, he felt them growing close. Touches that lingered too long to be platonic, looks that made his cheeks grow faintly pink.

Then Eleven came into his life. He had to keep her a secret, and that alone was enough to let Joyce slip away from him. She wasn't

trusting to begin with, her past giving her every reason to be wary, and Hopper was clearly hiding something from her.

He was happy with Eleven, happier than he had been in a long time, and he loved her more than anything, but watching Joyce be whisked away by Bob Newby hurt like hell. She had been the spark that brought him back. But, there was nothing he could do. He was selfish, but not selfish enough to risk Eleven's exposure, or to put Joyce and her family at any more risk. They had all been through enough.

Hopper knew that he was really in love with Joyce when he realized he was okay with suffering if it meant she could have her own happiness. He loved Joyce enough that just seeing her smile was enough to remind him that he was alive again, even if her smile was directed towards another man.

Then it all went to hell.

Bob had died right in front of them, and Joyce was...not the same.

She had lost Bob, but her trust in Hopper had significantly wavered after learning that El had been living with him all this time. Joyce wasn't smiling much these days, and that wasn't something he knew how to deal with. She was anxious all the time, and when she wasn't stressed about something, she was grieving. He didn't know how to help her, and that left him feeling helpless. She had pulled him from the darkest moments, and yet he couldn't even help her stay afloat.

It was slow, but he he worked hard to regain her trust and to see her smile. He went by her work frequently, making up whatever excuse he needed just to go by and check on her. He knew she was skeptical at first, but she eventually stopped asking him why he was there. There were good days, and there were bad days. Hopper was there for them all. As time went by, the good began to outweigh the bad, and he thought for the first time in a long time that they had a chance at being something.

He asked her to Enzo's, and with that cute smile of hers, she had accepted. But then she never showed up, and everything with the Russians happened, and once again, it all went to hell.

He was presumed dead.

It was funny, he thought, how he spent so many years wishing he was, and now he was locked up in some Russian prison praying that he would make it out alive.

He had to get home to El.

He had to get home to Joyce.

He was presumed dead, but as long as he thought of them, he would never allow the black hole to get him again.

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry for the lack of updates. I haven't really felt myself lately. hopefully the next update won't take as long...

41. Chapter 41

Notes for the Chapter:

I know it isn't New Year's yet... but enjoy it anyways!

Hopper isn't sure how he does it, but he somehow manages to get her out of that house. It's cold, the winter air burning against bare skin. The police station still has some Christmas lights hung up in a half-assed manner, and he knows he should probably care, yet all he can think about right now is her beside him. He doesn't deserve her trust, yet she looks to him with those brown eyes so full of emotion and he knows she does. Despite everything, she still does.

It hasn't been that long since Bob was murdered.

It hasn't been that long since Eleven showed up at her house that night.

It hasn't been that long since the Snow Ball.

He hasn't seen her since that night, the smell of their cigarettes are but a distant memory as they stood together in the parking lot. He knows she isn't okay. She might not admit it in front of the others, but he knows that everything is slowly eating her alive. The guilt. The loss. The anxiety.

He had driven to her work today to invite her to the New Year's Eve party at the police station, and he was certain she would tell him no. He walked in with a purpose and was prepared to be adamant about getting her out. To his surprise, it didn't take much convincing. She agreed to come, muttering something about being the only one at the house that night anyways. He didn't comment about how uneasy that thought seemed to make her. He knew she still wasn't okay letting Will out of her sight, but he was glad to see that she was trying.

She agreed to come, but she didn't let Hopper pick her up.

She met him there, and even though she was dressed rather casually, an oversized dark red sweatshirt and blue jeans, Hopper couldn't

help but to appreciate the way she looked. He could tell by looking at her that she wasn't sleeping like she should, yet she still somehow looked as beautiful as ever. Her hair was getting longer and longer, and he kept wondering what it would feel like to run his hands through her hair. As they walked into the station, all he could think about was how happy he was that she was here.

He opened the door, letting her step in first as he followed, and the sound of cheery music hit their ears. People were scattered around, chatting in various groups. Hopper was scanning his eyes for a place for the two of them to go stand alone, but everywhere appeared somewhat crowded. The small building was certainly at its max capacity.

"Chief!" Callahan smiled widely, catching his eye. "You actually came!"

The tall man was clearly already intoxicated, raising his red solo cup at him and Joyce entered. He was leaning over by the punch bowl

"Oh, and hello Mrs. Byers!" he added, grinning madly.

"What? You didn't think I'd show?" Hopper asked, quirkling a brow at him.

"No," Powell walked over, his face looking both amused yet annoyed. "You haven't ever been before, and now I have to pay him, so thanks a lot."

Hopper chuckled. "Not my fault you made a bet with him."

The two of them watched as Powell fished out his wallet and handed Callahan a ten dollar bill.

"Wait? Only ten? We agreed twenty!"

"You're lucky I'm even paying you at all," Powell argued, shoving his wallet back into his pocket.

"But-"

"Hopper?" Flo's voice cut him off as she approached them. "I didn't

know you were coming.”

Hopper sighed, slightly annoyed.

“He’s making healthier life choices, remember?” Callahan raised his cup again to cheer towards Hopper.

“Eating an apple instead of a donut doesn’t mean he’s changing his whole life,” Powell pointed out.

“What? I exercise,” Hopper grumbled.

“You? Exercise?” Powell laughed. “That’s like saying that I exercise, Chief. It just ain’t the truth.”

Hopper cut a glare over at him. “Yeah? I run.”

“Ha! The only time you run is when you’re running your mouth!” Flo cackled.

Hopper opened his mouth to protest, but stopped suddenly when he heard *her* laughing. He looked down at Joyce and couldn’t help but to smile himself. Her nose was crinkled and she was bringing up her hand to cover her mouth. The others were laughing at Flo’s joke as well, but he hardly cared.

It’s the first time he’s heard Joyce laugh in so long.

“Think somethings funny, do you?” he asked, teasing.

Joyce shook her head, her hand still covering her face as she tried to regain her composure.

“You do run your mouth a lot,” she smiled up at him.

“Yeah? That’s rich coming from you,” he said, and he watched as she rolled her eyes at the comment. “What? You don’t think I forgot junior year? At the fall festival?”

Her face flushed. “I wish you would forget it.”

“What happened junior year?” Callahan asked, and Hopper winced as

he remembered everyone else was still around.

“Oh, we aren’t drunk enough to start talking about high school memories,” Flo said, coming to his rescue as she began pouring some punch into a cup.

“I agree,” Powell said. “I was an idiot back then.”

“You’re still an idiot,” Callahan joked, swigging the rest of drink. “You guys want a drink?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Hopper said as Joyce nodded.

Callahan poured them some punch and handed them each a cup.

Flo began talking to Powell about his wife, and Callahan eventually meandered his way over to some other people, shouting out incorrect lyrics to the song along the way. Joyce sipped her drink and made a small grimace.

“I’m guessing it isn’t very good?” Hopper asked.

“It’s alright,” she gave a strained smile. “I can’t believe you even remember the fall festival.”

“How could I forget? You got me grounded for two weeks.”

She let out a laugh. “Life was so much simpler back then.”

“It can be simple again,” he said, glancing at her.

Joyce stayed silent for a moment, and he began to panic, wondering if he had ruined the night. She looked away from him and then took a deep breath.

“I want it to be,” she says softly.

He knows it’s nothing concrete, but it’s something.

Maybe this year things will be better for all of them.

Notes for the Chapter:

I've been gone a while, but this story just hit 60k!!
Help me celebrate by leaving a review? :p

42. Chapter 42

Summary for the Chapter:

An alternate ending to S3... I'm not a medical expert, so my apologies for any inaccuracies! Enjoy!

She was on fire.

There was a sharp throb in her temple, her vision blurring for a moment, but she quickly blinked it away. She steadied herself, fighting the urge to sink to the ground. She felt something wet on the side of her forehead. She thinks it might be blood. She knows it probably blood.

She felt like she could crumble at any second, but it didn't matter.

It was over.

Everything was finally over.

Hopper came bursting through the door, his expression swirling with worry, exhaustion, and the smallest bit of triumphant.

"Joyce," Hopper grabbed her arm and began to pull her towards him. "You did it. You closed it."

She glanced up at him, her eyes filling with tears. "I almost killed you."

"Almost," he gave her a small smile. "But you can't get rid of me that easy."

She let out a shaky laugh and couldn't help but to throw her arms around him. He hugged her back, and *she was on fire*.

"I thought after all that we might not get our date at Enzo's," she admitted against his chest.

"You think I'm going to miss that?" he squeezed her a bit tighter. "Not a chance."

She let out sigh and closed her eyes.

“You’re bleeding,” he said suddenly, pulling away from her.

His blue eyes widened and she doesn’t like the way he’s looking at her.

“So are you,” she said weakly.

He looked at her like what she said had no significance, and she knows he doesn’t care about himself. He never cares about himself. He’s selfless that way. Despite how much he likes to act like a macho tough guy, Hopper cares so much about those around him. He reaches his hand up to frame her face and she can’t help but to wince.

“Shit,” he mumbles. “That asshole threw you.”

He said it like he couldn’t believe it.

Like he didn’t want to believe it.

“He tried to kill you,” Joyce pointed out, shivering slightly at the thought.

“So did you.”

It was really messed up, but they can’t help but to laugh. After everything they’d been through in the last few days, the last thing they should be doing right now is laughing. Still, they just can’t help it.

As their laughter fills the silent room, Murray comes running in.

“Hey, lovebirds!” he shouted. “Quit your giggling and let’s go!”

Joyce is a bit slower to react to this than Hopper. He pulled away from her embrace and moved to pull her towards the exit by her hand. Murray flicked his eyes to the sight but didn’t comment. He led them out, and Joyce wondered if this will finally be the end of all this. They run into some soldiers on their way out, and it’s all a blur to her. She heard Murray saying they know Owens, and she

remembered they look suspiciously like Russian soldiers. The outfit swallowed her and felt a lot heavier than it should. After a lot of explaining by Murray and an angry outburst by Hopper, they managed to get out and back out into the fresh air. The cold night air hit their skin and there were bright lights all around them.

“You both need to get to one of the ambulances,” Murray said, gesturing off to the side. “I’m going to go find Owens and figure out what the hell took so long.”

Hopper doesn’t hesitate, pulling them over to one of the red vehicles.

“Joyce first,” Hopper said without hesitation as a paramedic turns to them.

“Wait, but-” she started to protest, but he gave her look that didn’t leave much room for argument.

“I’ll be right back,” he told her quickly, giving her hand a squeeze.

She started to ask him where he was going, but she knows he wants to find Murray and Owens.

He can’t handle not knowing.

The paramedic began to check her, shining a light in her eyes. She does what he instructs, her anxiety about the children bubbling inside her. He’s taking a long time and she can’t stand it. He’s wiping up the blood that’s on the side of her face and it stings. He’s painfully slow as he does this. Meticulous. She has no patience for this kind of thing, especially when so much is going on. Hopper and Murray are off with Owens, and she shouldn’t just be sitting here not doing anything. She needed to find the kids. She had no idea if they’re okay and the possibilities rummaging around in her mind were sending her to a dark place.

She can’t handle not knowing.

She pushed herself away from the paramedic, her eyes scanning around.

“I’m fine,” she said with as much reassurance she could muster.. “Do

you know if any kids are here? I have to-”

“Ma’am, I need you to sit back down,” he said, his eyes widening with surprise.

Joyce wanted to argue, but she felt another sudden wave of dizziness and she swayed a bit. The man grabbed her by the arm and she flinched, never comfortable with being touched by a stranger.

“Please, sit back down,” he guided her into the back of the ambulance.

She complied, pulling away from him as she did so.

“Did you lose consciousness at all?” he asked her, pulling out a clipboard with paperwork attached.

Joyce stared at him, furrowing her brow. Did she black out? She can’t remember. One moment she was reaching for the gun, and the next she was up and trying to turn the keys.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“You can’t remember?”

Joyce frowned. “I- I don’t know.”

He scribbled something down. She waited, watching idly as he wrote with illegible handwriting. She closed her eyes for a moment and the temptation to fall asleep called out to her. She’s aware of all the noise, all the chaos gathered around, but she doesn’t seem to care. Her mind is begging her to shut it all off and to fall asleep in the back of the ambulance.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said suddenly, her eyes flying open.

The paramedic moved quickly, helping her out of the ambulance. She’s throwing up onto the ground before she can even process it. She felt like the world was spinning and she wasn’t sure how to ground herself. She felt the unfamiliar paramedic hand on her back and even in this state, she wanted to shove it away.

"You have a severe concussion," he told her as she fought the involuntary tears forming in her eyes.

"No shit," she managed to mutter.

"Have you ever had any previous-" the paramedic began to ask before he was cut off.

"*What the hell?*" she heard Hopper's voice break out. "Joyce?!"

She wanted to turn and reassure him, but she felt the nausea rising up in her again. She simply stared at the ground, closing her eyes. She felt Hopper push the paramedic to the side and his hand came to span across the her back.

"What happened?" he barked out. "She was fine when I left!"

"She has a concussion," the paramedic wasn't phased by his loud shouting. "Do you know if she lost consciousness at any point?"

"What?" Hopper asked, the color draining from his face. "She doesn't remember?"

"No," the paramedic sighed with some obvious annoyance. "And it seems like you don't either."

Joyce wanted to step in to say that she was fine, but before the words could leave her mouth, she was retching the contents out of her stomach again.

"Are you kidding me?" he hissed. "I was a bit busy trying not to get murdered by the fucking Terminator!"

"Hopper, he's just doing his job," she heard Murray's voice cut in. "You still need to get checked out yourself."

Hopper doesn't reply and she felt his hand tighten against her back.

"You can stay right here and get checked out," Sam Owens added. "Everything else is practically handled as of now."

"I told you both that I'm fine," he snapped.

“Hop,” Joyce was finally able to speak. “Stop being difficult and just go.”

“See? Even Joyce is telling you to go do it!” Murray sounded utterly exasperated. “She’s throwing up and still worried about you. That’s so sappy it makes me want to throw up, too.”

Joyce stands up slowly to see that Hopper is glaring at his friend. Sam is silent as Murray laughed at his own joke, and Joyce can’t help but to think that Alexei would have been laughing right along with him.

“Fine,” he said harshly. “You can bring another paramedic over here.”

“I’ll send one over,” Owens said, gesturing with eyes for Murray to come with him.

Luckily, Murray managed to pick up on the signal. He rolled his eyes but followed him nonetheless.

“I left you for five minutes,” he said. She knew he wanted to sound angry, but his voice was unmistakably soft.

“It was probably the adrenaline,” the paramedic offered. “I’m guessing she blacked out and the effects are hitting her now that it’s all over.”

“I’ll be okay,” she said, sending Hopper a look she hoped was convincing.

“I know,” he said, surprising her. “I will be, too.”

She leaned into him, still feeling dizzy.

“You’re oddly optimistic,” she said. “Are you sure you didn’t get a concussion, too?”

He smiled at that.

“It’s like he said,” Hopper sighed with obvious relief. “It’s all over.”

Despite the pain, Joyce smiled back at him.

It was finally over.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't know about you guys, but I'm really ready for season 4! The wait has been so long and we still have so much longer to go... Is there anything specific you really want to happen in S4?

43. Chapter 43

Summary for the Chapter:

short and sad :p

“I can’t believe he’s dead,” Murray muttered into the silence.

Joyce frowned, her hands digging into the steering wheel so much that her knuckles were a ghostly white. She sped the car towards the mall, hardly glancing to see just how fast she was going. She’s pretty sure she’s never driven this fast in her life, and she’s acquired numerous tickets throughout her life from speeding. The trees are blurred and the wind is harsh as it hits their skin. They were almost there, the familiar lights of town coming into view, and she hated that he was choosing now to speak of this.

She still had the blood on her hands.

Murray still had the blood on his shirt.

Hopper was still trying to catch his breath.

“We couldn’t have done anything,” Hopper said solemnly, the slightest bit of hesitation present.

He was in the back seat, his legs far too long to be crammed in such a small space. She would have offered to switch with him if there had been more time.

There was never enough time.

“Bullshit,” Murray shook his head. “That’s bullshit.”

“We couldn’t have,” Hopper repeated, his blue eyes glancing over to make eye contact with Joyce.

She bit her lip, looking away from his gaze. It was heavy, and he was looking to her for help, and she didn’t know how she could say anything to make it better. She’d been grieving for over a year and she still felt like she drowning. How was she supposed to help Murray

stay afloat after witnessing that?

"We should've just sat in the damn car," he said. "You told us to wait in the car. I just- I wanted...I don't know what I wanted."

"You wanted him to have a good time," Hopper offered.

"And what a good time it was," he said bitterly. "Why did I even care? He was the enemy!"

"It's never that simple," Hopper said. "He wasn't the good guy to start, but he was helping us."

"He was only helping us because he had no other choice," Murray shook his head.

"I don't think you believe that," Hopper said.

Murray didn't reply.

Hopper was so much better at this. So much stronger. He'd been battling his ocean for years, fighting each wave of pain alone. He didn't have anyone there for him. Not like how he was there for her. Or how he's there for Murray right now. She doesn't know why he's looking to her for help, but she knows she can't abandon him. She can't let him try and save Murray alone.

Hopper's been fighting alone for far too long.

"Ale-" Joyce cleared her throat, fighting off the surge of emotions that were coursing through her. "Alexei didn't deserve to die...even if...even if he wasn't really on our side."

"He never had a chance," Murray took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "He was born on the wrong side and he was never given a chance."

"The world isn't always black and white," she said. "I think you helped Alexei realize that."

Murray grimaced. "I think he helped me realize that, too."

Joyce let out a shaky sigh he had been holding in. She felt Hopper's gaze burning into the back of her head. It was foolish, and certainly not the time, but she couldn't help but think about how she wanted his hand around hers again. His hand had engulfed hers, pulling her through the Fun Fair with purpose. She doubted he'd thought about it as much as her, but she liked the way their hands fit together. It would be comforting to have his hand in hers right now.

"I watched them shoot him," Murray continued, sounding as if he were in true disbelief. "He had just won that stupid toy, and he was so happy."

Joyce glanced up in the mirror and frowned as she looked at Hopper briefly. She really didn't want to hear this, but Murray needed it. He needed to talk it out, relive the traumatic moment and process it. She would be selfish to deny him that. No matter how badly she wanted to shove it down into the bottom of her mind and never let it resurface again, she had to let Murray do this. Hopper's eyes told her he was on the same page.

"I saw them pull out the gun, but there was nothing I could do. I just stood there. I just stood there holding those fucking corn dogs," he laughed harshly. "Why didn't I do anything? Why didn't I try and stop it?"

"You can't blame yourself," Joyce forced out the words she'd told herself so many times. "It's not your fault that he's dead."

"It sure as hell feels like it," he muttered, putting his glasses back on.

Joyce fought the urge to say, *I know*.

Murray's eyes were still glassy, but the mall was rapidly approaching and they didn't have the luxury to reflect much longer. He took several deep breaths in an attempt to regain his composure.

"We're going to find the people who did this," Hopper said seriously. "We'll find them, and we're shutting this shit down."

It was what they all wanted to hear.

What they all needed to hear.

“It won’t bring him back,” Murray pointed out.

“No,” Joyce agreed softly. “But it’s all we can do.”

Murray considered her words, glancing up at the mall as they entered the parking lot.

“Then let’s do it.”

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you all so much for 400 kudos!

44. Chapter 44

Summary for the Chapter:

Nancy is in her feels during Thanksgiving - who better to help than Joyce and Jim?

Nancy doesn't want to be here.

Something about it feels wrong. How could everyone be sitting around the table with smiles on their faces? How could they be acting like everything is fine?

It's bullshit.

There's no empty chairs at the table, but there should be.

Her mother is passing out the food, laughter is filling the air. She feels Steve staring intently at her. She feels Jonathan doing the same. She refuses to make eye contact. She's keeping it together. She's not letting anyone see how she feels.

Then her mother suggested they go around the table and say what they're thankful for. Nancy can't even bring herself to listen to half of it. What is there to be thankful for? After everything they've been through?

It's her turn, and they're all looking at her with eyes that are hungry for something she doesn't have.

"Oh. Um, I'm thankful for..." Nancy clears her throat. "I'm- excuse me."

She bolts up from the table. She hears chairs scraping against the wood floor and she just knows that Jonathan, or Steve, or even her mother is chasing her up the stairs. She slams her door shut, blinking away the tears that are forming.

"Go away!" she shouts. "I don't want to talk to you!"

She waits, and she thinks they might have gone away. She isn't

expecting the voice that comes back.

“It’s Joyce,” she says.

Nancy blinks.

“And Hopper,” Joyce adds quickly.

What the hell? Out of all the people to have followed after her, she wouldn’t have guessed Mrs. Byers or the Chief. What could they possibly say to help her?

“I don’t care,” she says. “I just want to be left alone.”

Hopper lets out a low sigh, and she hears the low sound of his voice speaking to Joyce. Nancy can’t make out the words. She wonders how he feels about this whole Thanksgiving dinner her mother has thrown together. She figures he probably doesn’t want to be here either. He doesn’t seem like the type of guy to be into things like this.

“It’s okay to be upset...” he starts, and it’s obvious he’s uncomfortable.

“I’m not upset,” Nancy argues.

It sounds stupid and she feels like she’s back into her angsty pre-teen stage. It almost makes her cringe.

“It feels wrong to celebrate with them gone,” Joyce says softly.

Nancy can’t help but to freeze up at that. Is she that transparent? Is it that obvious to everyone?

“Barb’s dead,” she can’t help but to cry as she says the words. “No matter what we do, she’s dead because of me.”

“It’s not your fault, kid,” Hopper says.

“She should be here,” Nancy shakes her head. “She would’ve made that casserole and we would’ve been laughing because she doesn’t even really like casseroles. She made them every year since we were

thirteen. She always made them because she knew that I liked them.”

There was a small silence.

“It’s not fair that Barb isn’t here with us,” Joyce says after a moment. “It’s not fair that a lot of the people in our lives who should be here aren’t here with us today...”

Nancy feels a pang of guilt as she thinks about Mrs. Byers boyfriend. She’d seen him a couple of times when they were both at the Byers’ house. Somehow, she and Bob Newby always seemed to be the first ones up. The first time she walked in on him in the kitchen, the two of them panicked. Joyce and Jonathan were entirely private and they both knew that they had screwed up by running into each other. They played it off well, and it became something of a little secret. They ran into each other often, both wanting coffee in the early hours. They never spoke to each other, but she knew how he liked his coffee. She knew he was kind by the way he moved, and the way his smile made her feel safe. She figured this was what made Joyce fall for him. Jonathan didn’t understand what his mom saw in him, but Nancy felt like she understood. He was a good man.

She’d never told Jonathan about it.

She doesn’t think Bob ever told Joyce about it either. She supposes she’ll never know now. She’s wanted to ask, but she doesn’t want to upset Mrs. Byers...

When she heard about what happened to Bob, she wondered how a person could get over something like that. Barb was dead, but she didn’t watch her die. She didn’t see her be ripped to shreds. Hearing about how gruesome Bob’s death was only reminded Nancy of how terrible of a death Barb probably has too. It was selfish, but hearing about Bob only made her spiral more into her own grief over Barb more.

“I hated the holidays for a long time,” Hopper says. “I avoided them because it made me feel like shit. How was it okay that I was alive and she wasn’t?”

Nancy doesn't know who he's talking about. She wants to ask, but she can't bring herself to. There's a lot of things she can't bring herself to do these days.

"I didn't see much to be grateful for. Hell, I didn't want to see anything to be grateful for," he says.

"How did you change?" Nancy asks, sniffing a bit.

"I didn't," he says. "Sometimes, I still feel awful. But then I have to remind myself that even though she's gone, I have other people in my life to be grateful for."

She hears one of them shift outside the door.

Nancy frowns at his words. "I know it sounds selfish that I'm saying I don't have anything to be thankful for..."

"It's not selfish," Joyce says. "We understand, Nancy. It's never as simple as you want it to be."

Nancy wraps her arms around herself.

Out of everyone here, she figures the two of them really do get it.

"I'm sorry," Nancy says.

She's sorry that she's acting this way. She should be stronger. She shouldn't have allowed herself to break down like this. She's also sorry that the two of them know what it's like. None of them should have to feel this way. None of this should have happened in the first place.

She shouldn't be surprised by their response.

"We're sorry, too."

45. Chapter 45

Summary for the Chapter:

El thinks Joyce and Hopper should be together, too!

“You play this song a lot,” El commented thoughtfully, arcing her brow with inquisitiveness.

“Yeah?” he asked. “Never thought much about it.”

“Almost every time we listen to music,” she nodded with a small smile. “It’s a pretty love song.”

“I guess,” he shrugged, washing the dish with vigor before handing it to her for her to dry it with the towel.

They had lasagna that night, and like most nights, they had a system. Tonight he was the washer and she was the dryer. He found that most nights he ended up being the washer because El hated the idea of wet food. He found it comical and when he mentioned it to Joyce, she suggested buying El a pair of rubber gloves. Hopper had rolled his eyes, insisting that El would get over the aversion, but he was starting to think he was wrong.

“Have you ever been in love?” she asked, setting the plate down beside her.

Hopper sent her a look. “Yeah, I was married a long time ago.”

“But you still listen to this love song,” El furrowed her brow. She had confusion written all over her face. “Are you still in love with her?”

Hopper almost dropped the plate he was washing.

“No,” he said. “Where did you get that idea?”

“Why else listen to a love song if not to think of someone you love?”

Hopper sighed, feeling the weight of her large eyes on him. “A part of me will always love Diane, but I haven’t been in love with her for a

long time. I don't think of her when I hear the song."

"So who is the song about?"

"What? It isn't about anybody."

"I don't believe you," El opened the cabinet and set the dry dishes down. "You play it too much for it not to be about somebody."

Hopper gave her an exasperated look. "Sometimes a song is just a song, kid."

Where was this even coming from? What was with her sudden interest in why he liked the song? He'd been playing it for a long time and she hadn't said anything until today. What brought this on?

"Joyce really likes this song," El said suddenly, smiling up at him.

Hopper blinked. Hard. "What? How do you know that?"

"I was humming it the other day when she picked us up from school," El said. "And she got all happy and told me she liked that song."

Hopper just stared at her.

She had really been humming it in front of Joyce?

"She also told me danced to the song at her prom," El added.

"O-oh?" Hopper asked, his eyes not meeting hers.

"I asked with who," El continued, her face full of mischief. "And her face got all red and she told me couldn't remember. Isn't that weird? You'd think she'd remember."

"It was a long time ago," he shrugged, trying his hardest to act indifferent.

What was this kid trying to get at?

"That's what she said, too," El said.

"Guess it was just an odd coincidence," he said, trying to bring the

conversation to an end.

El didn't seem to care in the slightest.

"So, I asked Dustin if he could find the yearbooks from when Mrs. Byers was in high school."

Hopper froze. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"I was curious," she gave him an innocent look. "It took some digging around, but he managed to find an old copy in the library. In Mrs. Byers' junior year, there was a picture of her dancing with someone. Do you want to guess who she was dancing with in the yearbook?"

Hopper couldn't believe this was happening.

"El, I don't think that-"

"It was you!" she said. "It was your song with Joyce!"

Hopper was fumbling, not sure of what to say. He didn't anticipate this happening even in his wildest dreams.

"You like the song because it reminds you of her," El said blatantly. "I think you're in love with her."

"*What?*" he glared at her. "It's just a coincidence. I forgot it was our prom song. Joyce obviously did, too."

"Well, I brought it up to her and-"

"*El!*" he wasn't sure if he was more angry or shocked.

She seriously brought this up to Joyce? Hopper felt like he could die of embarrassment. If he could crawl under his bed and never come out again, it would be fine by him. He hadn't felt this mortified in years. Why would El do ask her about it? The kids were really bringing up old memories with Joyce and he was somehow the last to know about it. Were they trying to ruin his life? He wasn't supposed to be sucked into their silly high school drama and yet somehow he felt like he was fifteen again himself, scared shitless that a girl might know he actually had feelings.

“Yeah?” she looked at him like it was obvious. “Don’t you want to know what she said?”

He furrowed his brow, staying silent for a moment.

“Yes...”

El gave him a smirk.

“She was really flustered. The picture wasn’t exactly the best in the world, and you two were in the back of it, but she confirmed it was you she was with. I asked her if she remembered the song you were dancing to, and she said it was *the* song.”

“I can’t believe you bothered her with that,” Hopper said, his embarrassment clear as day.

“Will told me she listens to the song a lot,” she added.

“For the love of God, please tell me you didn’t tell her that I listen to it a lot.”

Surely this had to be a dream. It simply couldn’t be real.

El let out a laugh. “No, but that would’ve been funny. She already seemed as awkward as you’re being right now.”

“I’m not being awkward,” he scowled. “You’re just meddling in things you shouldn’t.”

“Why?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“If you both love each other, why aren’t you together?”

Hopper shut off the sink and stepped away. He closed his eyes, letting out a sigh. He was not ready for this type of conversation with El of all people.

“Love is a lot harder when you’re adults,” he said simply.

“Is it because of that other guy?” El wondered.

Hopper's heart stopped.

"Other guy?" he didn't stop the paranoia from creeping out. "She's talking to another guy?"

"No!" El rushed out. "I didn't mean it like that. I meant the guy...that one that died at the lab."

"Oh," he said, guilt washing over him.

"Will talks about him sometimes," she said. "He really liked him. I think Mrs. Byers did, too."

"She did," he agreed with unease.

"But he's gone now," El reasoned. "Why can't you be with her now?"

"It's not that easy, kid."

"I think Mrs. Byer's will always love Bob," she said, staring at him intently. "Kind of like how you will always have a love for Diane...But I think Mrs. Byers has been *in love* with you for a long time."

Hopper hated that she was using his own words against him.

He hated that the kid was so perceptive.

He hated how desperately he wanted her words to be true.

"I've had a lot longer to process my pain," he said. "Joyce needs time."

El frowned. "You need each other."

Hopper wanted to argue, but what could he say?

El really had a point.

46. Chapter 46

Notes for the Chapter:

At last! An update! Sorry for disappearing on you all. I hadn't been feeling much inspiration to write... I hope you enjoy this! Let me know!

Joyce inches closer to the fire, staring into the bright orange flames in the hopes that they'll somehow make her feel warmer despite the chill that is continuously sweeping across her body. It's the of winter, but the Indiana snow hit them harder this year than most. The air is sharp and the ground is filled with a slick layer of ice. Despite the rather dismal weather, the kids still wanted to sit outside and do a bonfire. El had taken a certain liking to camping, and although both Joyce and Hopper had expressed their desire to wait until it was warmer, El was determined to have at least one fire out in the cold like a 'real camper.'

"You frozen yet?" Hopper asks her lowly, his voice only traveling to her.

She glances up at him, giving him a slight nod. Her eyes are dark, so much so that he has trouble discerning them from her pupil. She knows she looks tired, and it would be foolish to try and say she wasn't. It has been an unbelievably long day at work with mundane task after task. She had thought her shift was almost over after she finished restocking the cans on aisle five, soon realizing she wasn't even halfway through with it. She'd nearly cried tears of joy when she was able to clock out. She was desperately trying to ignore the fact that she would have to be up early for the morning shift tomorrow, doing her best to focus on the moment they were in now.

"I can hear your teeth chattering from here," Hopper laughs. "We can leave whenever you're ready."

"The kids aren't ready to go yet," she says, looking over to Will and El who are giggling madly as they shove marshmallows onto the metal prods.

Hopper follows her gaze and gives a sigh. She gives him a small smile and scoots closer to the fire. She adjusts her scarf, pulling it up to her chin.

“You move any closer and you’re going to catch fire,” Hopper jokes.

“I think I’d be okay with that,” she says without hesitation.

He shakes his head at her. She watches as his gaze goes into the flames and she follows it. Orange is flickering violently and billows of smoke are rising, blowing directly into Joyce. She blinks, her eye suddenly overcome with tears as a reaction. She coughs, turning her face away.

“You’re going to smell like smoke.” Hopper comments, and she hears the distinctive displeasure in his voice.

Joyce can’t help but to laugh at that, the sound mixing with her coughs. “We smoke cigarettes.”

“It’s different,” he frowns. “This smoke smells terrible.”

“Most people would say that cigarette smoke smells ten times worse.”

“Well, I’m not most people.”

“No,” she smiles. “You’re not.”

Hopper sends her a look, giving her his own smile as he holds onto her gaze. Joyce feels the warmth from his eyes spreading across her body and she has the sudden urge to kiss him. Her eyes flicker to his lips and she watches as he stiffens. She looks back up at him slowly, her eyes taking their time as they travel his jawline. She blinks, finally looking back at him and sees the desire written plainly across his face.

She is about to smirk at him, ready to initiate a promise for later, when a plastic bag of marshmallows soars across the air and smacks Hopper right in the face.

“ *What the hell?* ” Hopper shouts out in surprise.

“El!” Will says. “You weren’t supposed to hit him in the face!”

El is bent over laughing, unable to control herself. Hopper picks up the bag of marshmallows and sends a glare in his daughter’s direction. Joyce can’t help but to let out a laugh herself, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. Hopper directs his glare at her.

“Don’t laugh!” he hisses. “It’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny,” Joyce tries to regain her composure.

“S-sorry!” El finally gets words out. “I just wanted to get your attention.”

“Well, mission accomplished,” Hopper says. “What do you want?”

“We were going to ask if you two wanted to toast some marshmallows with us,” Will says.

“And that involved throwing this?” Hopper asks, opening the bag and pulling out a marshmallow.

El grins at him..

“Once we finish this, we’re leaving,” he says.

“No!” El says, her amusement gone.

“Do we have to leave yet?” Will frowns, looking to Joyce to overrule the decision.

“It’s getting late, sweetie,” Joyce says. “I have to work tomorrow.”

“But first, I can show you the best way to toast a marshmallow,” Hopper says. “I used to do this all the time with my dad and he showed me the best way to do it.

El hands them both a skewer and watches with interest. Hopper sticks it through the marshmallow and holds it over the fire, slowly beginning to rotate it.

“What you want to do is make sure you are getting it evenly heated.

You don't want one side to get too much fire, otherwise it'll burn. A good marshmallow will have a slight tint to it."

El and Will nod, immediately copying him. They stick their marshmallows over the fire and begin to turn it.

"Not so fast, El," he says, before turning to Joyce. "You going to have one?"

"Hmm, you make me one," she says. "I always burn mine."

"Mom, you got to try it yourself!" Will says, never taking his eyes off of his marshmallow. "You can do it!"

Joyce can't bring herself to argue, her frozen fingers shoving the marshmallow through the skewer and then holding it over the fire. She watches as Hopper gives the kids more tips and can't help but to feel content as they hang on his every word. It's a feeling she's getting use to these days. They're all together more often then they're apart, and it's surprising to Joyce how natural it feels. She hadn't ever thought that she'd find herself where she was now, and despite all the pain and heartache, she was happy.

"Mrs. Byers! Your marshmallow is on fire!" El yells with panic, breaking her from her thoughts.

Joyce blinks and yanks her marshmallow towards her, quickly blowing out the flames. She looks at her marshmallow and isn't surprised to see that it is completely black.

"You weren't turning it enough," Will says, laughing. "But that's okay, you can just try again. We have a whole bag!"

Joyce smiles at him, knowing that this was his mischievous plan all along. "No, I'm alright. Eat yours. You both did such a great job. Yours look like they were toasted by professionals."

She watches as they begin to eat and feels Hopper move closer to her. He holds out his marshmallow out to her.

"Here," he says.

“You sure?” she asks. “Mine is burned.”

“Eh,” he shrugs. “I like it better that way.”

Joyce can only shake her head. “Even after that whole demonstration you gave?”

“I made most of it up. You know my dad. That old asshole never did any of this with me.”

She smiles. “You really are something else, Jim Hopper.”

47. Chapter 47

Summary for the Chapter:

I wanted to write some Hopper/Murray bickering, so here you go!

They began their descension down, the feeling of their stomachs rising into their chests was all Joyce could focus on. They were only moments away from whatever chaos lurked within the Russian base. Joyce could feel her heart beating in her chest and she crossed her arms, uncertain of what was to come next. She felt sweat trickling down her neck and found herself longing for the feel of a cold shower.

She glanced toward Hopper and he caught her gaze. He was standing close to her, his height ever so prominent in this small confined place. She couldn't bring herself to look away from him, the desire for comfort drawing her in. His eyes offered her what she desired, so often like his eyes always seemed to do these days. They stared at one another, making promises that they couldn't say with their words.

We'll be okay.

We'll get through this.

We'll save the kids.

We'll go to-

"Not to be *that* guy..." Murray said, adjusting his glasses as he looked between the two of them.

"You're always *that* guy," Hopper glared towards him and frowned.

Murray looked at him with offense.

"Just spit out whatever psycho mumbo jumbo you have to say and let's get it over with."

"You wound me, Jim Hopper," Murray said.

Joyce's mouth twitched upward at the comment,

"Are you going to say what you're thinking or not? I don't know if you noticed but we don't exactly have all day." Hopper said, his impatience causing the room to tense. "That door is going to be opening any second and your chance to spew nonsense will be limited to getting us the hell in and out of there."

Murray held up his hands in defense. "All I was going to suggest is maybe the two of you could play down your relationship a little once we're down there."

"What?" Joyce asked as Hopper spat out, "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you both heard me," Murray rolled his eyes. "I'm just saying, I don't know if whoever is in charge at this fine establishment is fine with their employees dating."

"For the last time, Joyce and I aren't togeth-"

"Save that speech for someone who hasn't spent the last few hours as a third wheel," Murray shook his head. "You two keep making eyes at each other like that and you might blow this whole operation."

Hopper just stared at him, his blue eyes ablaze with a rage that he couldn't unload on the man. Joyce bit her lip, looking anywhere she could to try and avoid the tension that Murray had just set off.

"Okay, okay, fine," Murray sighed. "We can keep pretending that you two aren't anything, but seriously? I don't know if you both both just conveniently forgot, but I'm in the room, too!"

"Oh, trust me, we couldn't forget you were here even if we tried," Hopper said. "You can't go two minutes without saying something. All you do is run your damn mouth."

"If I didn't say anything we'd be standing here in silence while you stare at each other like star crossed lovers," Murray said.

"You're ridiculous!"

“You’re ridiculous!”

Joyce let out a sigh, bringing her hands up to rub her face. She couldn’t help but to wonder if the children were having these kind of petty arguments. It certainly felt like something that would happen when she was in junior high. Still, on one hand, Hopper had a point. Murray kept sticking his nose in places it didn’t belong. No matter how many times they told him to knock it off, he kept persisting that something was there. On the other hand, Murray wasn’t exactly wrong. There was something there. Hopper knew it. Joyce knew it. They all knew it. She just wasn’t ready and Murray was throwing it in their faces every chance he got. Yet, they were sharing lots of gazes lately, all discretion seemingly forgotten in his presence....

“When this thing is all over and you two finally get over yourselves and hook up or date or whatever the hell it is that you plan to do! I expect an apology from both of you for this agony you’ve put me through.”

“You expect an apology?” Hopper asked. “Joyce? Do you hear this guy?”

“Yeah, Joyce!” Murray mocked. “Can you believe *this* guy?”

Joyce glanced between the two of them.

“Can we just focus on getting in there and getting out?” she asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to do!” they shouted in unison.

They glared at each other, both stunned to have said the same thing.

“Good,” she said.

They fell into an awkward silence, the unsettling of the elevator painfully loud.

Joyce looked over to Murray and thought about his words, wondering if it was that obvious to everyone. She felt like her stomach was flipping from anxiety, and she wasn’t sure if it was because of the uncertainty that was before them with this super secret Russian base, or the uncertainty that remained with her

relationship with Hopper. She didn't know why she was still trying so hard to push him away when it was clear how they both felt.

She knows it's because she wasn't ready. But what about now? Why wasn't she ready now? After everything, she should be. After all, wasn't time precious? Hadn't everything they'd been through proven that? What was she waiting for?

She hated that Murray was making her feel this way, especially now of all times, but he was obviously doing this from a place of good intentions. Or maybe they really were getting on his nerves with all the amorous looks and sexual tension... Either way, Joyce had to make up her mind. She couldn't keep this up.

"Alright, Love Birds," Murray cleared his throat. "You ready?"

"I thought we agreed not to call us tha-" Hopper started to hiss out.

"We're ready," Joyce said, her voice steady.

After this was all over, everything had to change.

Notes for the Chapter:

I really wish s4 was coming out soon. I don't know about you all, but this wait is taking FOREVERRRR

48. Chapter 48

Summary for the Chapter:

This chapter deals with Covid. I thought it would be interesting to explore how the Stranger Things characters would cope with the idea of the virus. I know this is a sensitive subject and I don't know everyone's circumstances, so I tried to write this chapter as the best I could while keeping that in mind. My heart goes out to anyone who has or had Covid, or who has lost a loved one. I continue to keep the world in my thoughts and hope that all of you and your loved ones are able to stay safe during these times.

Hopper slams the door.

He doesn't care how loud it is, or that it makes the entire frame shake.

He's mad.

So unbelievably mad.

He storms inside and isn't expecting anyone else to be home. He's stomping around like a petulant child, and suddenly he sees Jonathan sitting on the couch, random pictures scattered across the table. The teenager looks up at him and recognition flashes on his face as he sees the Chief's tense jaw and furrowed brow.

"Everything good?" he asks, pushing a stray photograph into a pile he has on the left side of the table.

Hopper knows that he shouldn't complain to Joyce's kids about these kind of problems, but today he just can't help himself.

"Your mother will be the death of me," he grits, teeth clenched.

"Why now?"

Hopper might have usually laughed at the quip, but he can't even muster a smirk.

"She shouldn't be putting herself at risk like this," he shakes his head. "I mean, we don't know anything about this...this virus."

"Oh," Jonathan says, realizing what the problem was.

"People are dying from it. Lots of people think they're fine and then suddenly they aren't. I can't lose - we don't know anything about it!"

"Melvald's is requiring masks, though," Jonathan offers as he looks up from his photographs.

"Yeah," Hopper rolls his eyes. "But we all know that jackass isn't going to enforce anything. Half the town thinks it's fake."

"Did you ask her to quit her job?" Jonathan ventures, abandoning his task on the table.

Hopper glances at him. "Don't ask it like I'm the bad guy. I'm just trying to keep her safe. She doesn't even need to be working. I make enough that we could be fine until this thing blows over."

"So you asked her to quit, and now she's pissed at you," Jonathan states and something about the way he says it makes Hopper's stomach sink.

"Why is me wanting to prioritize her health such a bad thing?" he grumbles.

"It's not," Jonathan says.

"So you agree with me?"

"Er, well, no..."

"What do you mean? You just said-"

Jonathan cuts him off, and Hopper's eyes widen as the teenager speaks. "It's not a bad thing to want her to be safe, but you don't

understand what it's like for her. You could be a doctor or a lawyer and she still wouldn't quit her job."

"I understand she wants to have her independence," Hopper furrows his brow with slight confusion.

"No, it's not just that," he looks uncomfortable. "She trusts you. Hell, I trust you, which is saying something. But you don't know what's it like. All those years my mom stayed with my dad, it wasn't as simple as wanting to be with him and not wanting to be with him. That's how it looks from the outside. Your husband hits you, you leave."

"I know it's not that simple, kid," Hopper frowns.

"What happens if things go sideways with you guys? She'd have no money, and she'd be stuck. I know you think it won't happen, but you know she has anxiety and you don't just forget the awful shit from your past. She wanted to leave my dad, but she didn't have enough money to support herself and two children."

Hopper hates to think about it. He hates to imagine Joyce trapped in a abusive relationship because she doesn't have money, and he hates that she would still have that same fear lingering in her mind. He hates that she has to work in a literal pandemic because of this fear. He hates that she's had to go through so much, and he hates how he was definitely being an ass to her earlier. He visibly cringes as he recalls their argument.

"I'm not having this argument," Joyce avoided making eye contact with him, focusing specifically on the brushing of her hair.

"Seriously?" Hopper came up behind her. "You're acting like this isn't a big deal."

"We have bills to pay," she said, setting the brush down. "They don't just magically disappear because we're in pandemic."

"Joyce, we've been over this. My job makes enough and it's not as big of a risk..."

"And? Did you not hear me the first time? I'm. Not. Quitting."

"You could die if you get it!" he shouted as she walked away from him, slipping on her Melvald's work shirt.

"So could you," she said. "Why don't you quit your job?"

"It's not the same. I'm not constantly greeting customers and in contact with them."

Joyce gave him an irritated look.

"You come into contact with people all the time and you also smoke way more than I do," she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. "I'm done with this conversation."

"But-"

"I mean it, Hop," she said.

He followed her out to the car, not content with letting it end. She opened the door and looked up at him, her features softening a bit.

"I know you're worried about me, but I promise I'll be alright."

He gritted his teeth, not giving in. "You don't know that."

"Hopper..." she sighed.

"No. Don't you see how selfish you're being?"

Her eyes widened with anger. "Selfish? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I'm asking you to stay home where it's safe and you're putting yourself out there for no damn reason!"

Joyce stared at him a moment before deciding to climb in the car, slamming the door shut behind her. She started the car with a jagged turn of the key and sped out of the driveway, tossing him an ugly look as she did so.

"I know you don't want to think about it like that," Jonathan offers lowly, bringing him out of the memory. "And for what it's worth...I don't think she has any reason to worry."

Hopper swallows, looking down at the teenager who fidgets uncomfortably. It's a big admission. A damn big admission. He'd been with Joyce for a while and he'd been making break throughs with Will, but Jonathan had remained as distant as always. He hadn't expected to get Jonathan's approval like this. Especially after he was opening up about an argument with his mother.

"I'm just worried," Hopper says, knowing that any kind of formal acknowledgment of the statement would make it even more awkward for the two of them. "I don't know why she can't just let me worry about her."

"You should know better than most that isn't how she is," he says

"Yeah," Hopper agrees, bringing his hand up to the back of his head. "I just can't handle the thought of..."

"Seeing another person you love in the hospital?" Jonathan offers hesitantly.

Hopper blinks harshly, clearing his throat. "Yes."

"I won't sit here and tell you that everything will be okay," he said. "I don't know if it will be. Nobody really knows what's going to happen. but we can't turn against each other. We're all on the same team at the end of the day."

Hopper nodded. "You have a lot of faith, kid."

"I think we'll get through it," Jonathan shrugged. "I mean, look at everything we've been through."

"You've got a fair point there," Hopper says

"Yeah, I know," he smiles at him.

Hopper lets out a low chuckle.

"Thanks for this," he tells him. "I know these conversations aren't your favorite, but you're really perceptive."

Jonathan shrugs. "Normally I would take that as a compliment, but

the walls are pretty thin and I basically heard most of your arguments.”

Hopper can't help but to laugh at that.

He hates what's happening in the world, but in this moment, he feels like things might actually end up being okay.